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STORY BY
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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*





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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke
This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her How I Feel!



“The Piggy Duke was intelligent, strong, kindhearted, and sadly, too stubborn for his own good. From another perspective, the story of Shuya Marionette can be interpreted as his tragedy.”

—Director of Shuya Marionette

Prologue: Rebuilding Kirsch Mage Institute

“Rebuild this mage school in just two months,’ ya say? That’s impossible, boss!”

“It’s an official request from the palace, so quit whinin’ ’bout it!” the man hissed back gruffly. “They also say that mages are comin’ soon to help! If we have them around, then things will improve, at least somewhat!”

“But there’s no way in hell that snobby mages would obey us commoners!” the other man protested.

“Hey, shush! What if the students hear ya?!”

I can hear you loud and clear, ya know? I heaved a sigh internally. *Ugh, it’s too early in the morning for it to be so noisy.*

There was another yell from the group of commoners. “Doing the impossible is our job, remember?”

Beside the commoners, cargo wagons advanced forward in an endless stream, carrying materials such as stone, wood, and bricks. There were also a number of construction tools I wasn’t familiar with.

This sequence of events was a rare sight at Kirsch, but lately this had been the norm every single morning. It wasn’t just the commoners who were busy and hustling about, though; we nobles happened to share the mood.

“I’m heading over to your place next week, so make sure to give me a grand welcome!” a boy shouted.

“That’s fine, but don’t repeat history and come with a big group like last time! We’re poor, so preparations are super tough!”

This was all because of what had happened just a few moments earlier. All the students of Kirsch Mage Institute had gathered in the sports grounds and there the headmaster had made a sudden announcement. Since the reconstruction of the campus had begun, the students were to return to their families’ lands as soon as possible. Or at least they had to leave the campus.

In other words, he announced that the summer holidays were starting slightly early.

“Now, of all times? Even though I finally got the motivation to *actually* listen to lectures?” I trailed off, then sighed.

“Shuya, could you stop with the sighs? This is the *fifth* time

today!” Alicia snapped.

“Alicia, seriously? You counted them?” I muttered weakly, then sighed again.

“That’s six times! And getting back to your earlier statement, you should know very well that our lectures should be the last thing on your mind in this situation!” Alicia exclaimed.

Kirsch Mage Institute wasn’t ready for classes at all right now. Having students around would only get in the way of rebuilding. *I know that. She doesn’t have to spell it out for me.*

“More importantly, Shuya. What are you going to do? I hear that students will get paid if we help with the reconstruction, but...from the looks of it, everyone’s heading back home. But, in your case! You owe me, so you should take this opportunity to properly...” Alicia trailed off. “You’ve been looking at that for a while.”

“Ah, hey!” I yelled. “Hey, give that back!”

The girl beside me snatched away the paper in my hands. She didn’t look like a commoner at all, no matter what angle you observed her from. The commoners who came to the school to help with the reconstruction all secretly whispered that nobles were truly different, even in looks, when they saw her, but... *That’s not true*, I thought.

“An ad for earth mages... And if you can manipulate golems precisely, you get paid one gold coin a day?! That’s unthinkable good pay! Water mages have some pretty good pay too... I don’t think water mages would help with construction though... Hmm, how about your fire, Shuya? Let’s see... Whoa, that’s dirt cheap. Well, it’s better than helping out with chores at school, though.”

“I’ve thought this for a while, but your financial sensibilities are surprisingly close to a commoner’s for being royalty,” I commented.

“O-Oh, shut up! I keep the way of the common folk in mind at all times! That’s a good thing, isn’t it?!”

This girl is actually a princess, after all. But I get why the commoners stare at Alicia. How can I put it? She’s short, but there’s something eye-catching about her. Even when I first saw her, I scared myself half to death. She’s got her hair down right now, even though she usually ties it up. It’s a novel sight. Cute, I mean.

“Ya know, Alicia, forget about me. What about you?”

“What about me?”

Well, as for why the second princess of Cirquista is so familiar with a low-rank noble like me, well...I actually owe this girl a debt. A humongous one, at that..

“When are you going back to Cirquista?” I asked.

“You idiot. Isn’t it obvious? I’m going when they send people to pick me up, of course. Do you think a girl from a high station like me would pack up my own luggage?”

I voiced my displeasure. "You don't have to be so snide about it."

"But, well, lucky you. Once you get back to your home, you can do whatever you want. In my case, if my country tells me to return quickly and I do, I'll get to live in confinement. Even though it's the holidays, I won't be able to go anywhere."

"Well, considering what happened, it's obvious that they wouldn't want you to go out. Even if I go back, though, I'll probably spend every day in the fields or stuff like that. Don't underestimate the tough life of a penniless noble."

A baron's land with only its size going for it was a pretty harsh place. My life consisted of work, work, and more work all day and night. Commoners thought that nobles lived luxurious lives, but that was definitely off the table in my house.

"When I get back, I'll brag to my li'l bros! We managed to witness the slaying of a dragon with our own eyes!" a boy yelled.

Since the holidays began early, everyone hopped into their carriages in high spirits.

"'Once on shore, we pray no more,' or whatever it is they say," Alicia muttered slowly. "Even though everyone shook like a leaf back then, they're all so oblivious now."

"That's just the way things are." I shrugged. "I still can't believe that it all actually happened, though..."

To be honest, I still don't know whether that was reality or not. Just one single day— That was all it took for my peaceful everyday life to crumble into nothing.

The entire school had a strange, floaty atmosphere to it. It didn't feel like any of this was real at all.

A dungeon had been discovered outside the campus and a horde invasion had occurred. The last time that a horde invasion had happened in Daryth was in the far past, nearly one hundred years ago. After all, if a dungeon spawned somewhere, people would usually notice the appearance of unfamiliar monsters and strange howls from afar... There were many signs that would hint at a disaster like this.

However, the recent dungeon master had been very swift. Under its rule, even the orcs I usually made fun of were scary. I had thought that orcs and monsters in the forest were easy pickings that would fall with one spell, but the monsters led by that dungeon monster... How do I put it? They were *different*. One wrong step and I would have died.

I heard someone shouting somewhere but dismissed it, sinking back into my thoughts.

Monsters had poured out from the darkness, and many times

during the ordeal I pinched my own cheeks, thinking that it all might be a dream. But the insistent, stinging pain each time proved otherwise.

When the dragon appeared before us, we couldn't do anything. I thought we might all die, but right as I thought that, the beautiful Denning retainer went out of the barrier. She didn't seem to have any chances of winning, and to save that retainer, a commoner girl followed, and... Then, my feet had finally moved.

Dying a noble death was important to a soldier. I hadn't joined the Daryth army yet, but I was still a person who wanted to protect this country. I thought that at least in my last moments I could fight and die bravely, but then—

“Shuya! Hey, Shuya! Are you listening to me?!”

“Whoa!” I exclaimed. “What is it? Don't do that all of a sudden, Alicia!”

“Ugh, you fool. Are you *still* vexed that you weren't able to do anything?”

I clenched my jaw. “Of course I am. I was completely *useless*.”

For a long time, I had thought that I was a special person. *Well, I mean, I'm a noble after all, you know? Of course, I'm not a great noble like those from House Denning or anything, but I am a noble and a mage. I have the resolve to put my life on the line to protect the people of my land if anything happens, and I have been educated to that end too.*

Look at reality, though. There was nothing I could do. Faced with those monsters, I could only quake in my boots inside the barrier our headmaster had made.

“Oh, you're so silly, Shuya. What do you think you could have done? A small-fry mage like you wishing for too much is only asking for a death sentence!”

Alicia... I cursed her inwardly. Would anyone go this far normally? She's such an unpleasant person. Her personality is probably why she has so few friends. The standard for cuteness is quite high among the girls here at Kirsch Mage Institute, and she is one of the cutest...but her personality is a huge mess. Are all royalty like her? Ah, but Princess Carina was kind...

“Look over there! Who would have thought that *he'd* be with the Cardinal, of all people?!” A girl nearby was gushing over someone.

“How do you think we can get acquainted with him? I received a letter from my papa, and he said that I should become friends with him. That's way too hard, though. There aren't any openings for us to get close... He's already so far out of reach.” Another girl pouted.

The girls were making a fuss about someone. *Did a celebrity show up or something? Well, I wouldn't be surprised, considering that Royal Knights and people of that caliber have been walking around the campus*

pretty often recently. I looked around in response to the girls' comments, and there I found someone I didn't expect. *No... I did expect this.*

The noisy crowd was looking at *that guy*. With the headmaster, the Cardinal, and even Princess Carina waiting on him. He was surrounded by extraordinary people, and they were all deep in conversation.

The biggest problem student of Kirsch was, well, no longer a problem. After a single night, he had become a hero whose name would be passed down through generations, and probably nobody would call him "Piggy Duke" like they once had.

"Alicia, your fiancé sure is popular—" I hastily cut myself off mid-sentence. "I'm just joking! Don't get so mad!"

Phew, that was close. Talking about stuff that reminds Alicia of her past engagement is a huge minefield. Sh-She's not angry, is she? I snuck a look at her face. *Wait, huh?* Alicia stared at Denning with a serious look on her face. *What's this? Is she thinking the same as those girls from earlier?*

Right now, that guy was the hottest stock in Kirsch, and it was rumored that he had thinned down quite impressively as of late. *Oh, wow. He's really thin compared to before! Everyone treated him as a human orc whose personality was worse than trash, but look at him now. I'm not kidding about that comment! Back then, everyone would insult him behind his back, but I bet nobody could imagine that now considering his current status.*

And I'll be frank, the pace at which he's thinning down doesn't seem like something only hard work could achieve. I often see him doing weird training routines with that retainer of his, but... House Denning is crazy loaded, so did they make him drink a secret potion or something? Maybe?

I sighed. "That guy used to be the Piggy Duke, right? I can't believe this is all happening."

During the horde invasion of the school, a fellow second-year student managed to skillfully defeat a monster. Not just any monster, but a monster that was especially problematic compared to the others: a dragon. Those weren't even seen around in the southern half of the continent very often. That second-year was Slowe Denning, the third son of House Denning, a famous and powerful noble house in Daryth. He took down the dragon himself and became a hero.

I knew that he worked really hard to combat his past notorious reputation, but... *Suddenly he's a Dragon Slayer? The heck?* Not only that, but I heard that he changed the element of the Mystical Sword possessed by a certain commoner who was rumored to be the top contender for Guardian Knight. *My brain can't keep up with all this. In*

other words, that guy was hiding his real abilities all this time? Why would he do that?

“Hey, Alicia. Sorry for interrupting your Denning staring session, but...”

Alicia froze for a moment. “Huuuh?! Wait a minute, what did you just say?! Me, that guy?!”

“You *were* staring at him all this time, though,” I pointed out. “Like all the other girls are doing.”

“I’m so *not* staring at him! Don’t lump me in with those clout chasers! You’ve really started making some rude comments from time to time lately! You’re definitely looking down on me, even though I’m a princess!!!”

“Okay, okay, I get it! You weren’t staring at him. My mistake!”

She harrumphed. “As long as you get it. If you say that again, though, I swear I’ll punch you—”

“Lord Denning!” A girl called out to Denning, despite the circle of *very* important people surrounding him. “Is it true that you were summoned to the capital?!”

“Hey, who are you?!” one of the people surrounding him snapped at her, offended.

“I heard rumors that you’re going to quit school too! They’re lying, right? I don’t want that to be true!” she continued.

Wow. Even the famous Cardinal is near Denning right now. She sure has guts. Wait, that girl is... I searched my memory. Oh, right. She was the commoner who tried to save Denning’s retainer back then. Oh boy. Alicia’s got her eyes narrowed into slits. She does that whenever her mood plummets. It’s sooo obvious.

“You won’t quit Kirsch Mage Institute, right, Lord Denning? Right?! Lord Denning?!” Her tone was almost pleading.

Such rumors were certainly circulating around Kirsch. It was weird that someone from *House Denning* would enroll in a mage school in the first place. Normally, by our age, they were already in the army and receiving special education there.

“Everyone’s afraid to say it out loud, but there’re a lot of people who would be sad if you withdrew from this school, Lord Denning!”

Reluctantly, I silently agreed with her. If Denning left this school altogether right now, I would be rather troubled.

The moment he made the black dragon fall with a spell...my life probably changed. I thought that I wanted to become someone like him.

There were countless people in this school who wanted to become strong right now. After all, many students carried themselves differently after the incident. If that guy was around, we could

improve with him as the goal in our sights. His existence was a good stimulus for us all.

“Lord Denning! You’re serious? You won’t quit Kirsch, I see! I’ll put my faith in your words, okay?! Also, if you’re heading to the capital, then I expect some souvenirs, you hear me?!”

Not only that, but I heard that there was apparently a high chance that Daryth would go into war against the Dustour Empire soon. That was exactly why I intended to cherish every single day of the next two months of our long school holiday. I was keeping it a secret from Alicia, but I had zero intention of returning to the Newkern lands.

In these next two months...I will become a stronger man. In order to do that, I would spend this time in an allied country.

I planned to head to Dungeon City, Zenelaus, one of the three big cities of the Freedom Union.

Chapter 1: The Forgotten Events of the Anime

Oink, oink, oink.

“A horde invasion in the middle of our endlessly tense back-and-forth with Dustour. When I first heard the news, I doubted my own ears and feared for the outcome, but who would have thought that a new Dragon Slayer would hail from House Denning? With this, Cirquista can’t rub the fact that they managed to tame a dragon in our faces anymore!”

“I happened to overhear that the commoners think House Denning was way more reliable than the guardians of the royal family...but indeed, we cannot argue against that view in this incident. The capital is in an uproar. I have heard many good rumors from my son, but I really shouldn’t have expected anything less from the famous Prodigy of Wind!”

Wait. This guy’s son is that boy with natural curly hair, right? If I remember right, that guy was the person who slandered me the most back at Kirsch Mage Institute. I felt a bout of irritation come over me. But...I must keep calm. Resist. Right now, I must exercise self-control. Pointing that out in this place would be rude. After all, I was currently...

“Here, please enjoy the meal. This ball was organized for your sake, after all!”

Though the hall was decorated with glamorous and gorgeous ornaments, there was a certain finesse and elegance to it, along with the specific type of dignity that came with having a long history. A magnificent chandelier hung from the ceiling and its glimmering light shone down on paired-off men and women dancing on the floor. There were many nobles sipping drinks from their glasses gracefully as well. Yes, indeed, I was at a ball.

This was the fortress city, the capital of Daryth, which was sometimes compared to a giant stronghold. I was in the royal castle located in the central area of the city.

“Ah, here you are, Lord Denning! Could I bother you for a retelling of how you slew the dragon?”

Another noble laughed. “How many times are you planning on making the Dragon Slayer repeat himself?”

I heaved a sigh inwardly. *Another bunch of people have come my way. There was some gorgeous food around, but I had no time to eat at all. Jeez, how many of you are there? Is there no end to the talking?* It seemed that powerful people of the aristocracy were very much devoted to making friendly conversation.

I know the truth, though. All of these self-important people have belittled me thoroughly behind my back before.

“Still, Dragon Slayer, I heard that the duke has already returned to the front lines, but...is that true?”

“My father is the linchpin in our operations against Dustour. After he spent one night decimating all the monsters that ran away, he immediately returned to the battlefield,” I said steadily.

“I see. Well, the people of the empire change their tactics depending on his presence, so that makes sense.”

After my father exchanged a few words with me at Kirsch, he literally immediately left. Like, seriously. *Since his original goal of exploring the dungeon was impossible, I guess he probably decided that there was no meaning in staying there any longer.*

When he left the school, though, he said to me that he was waiting for me on the other side, but... Who in their right mind would head to the front lines? And I have no intention of quitting Kirsch at all, you know? Even at school there were rumors that I'd leave, but that place is the oasis that heals my heart, okay? I can't leave it that easily.

Speaking of Kirsch, it's in the middle of reconstruction and the long holidays. Most of the students would probably just return to their family lands, but I was sent an invitation to the capital by the queen herself so she could show her appreciation. I had already been busy every day dealing with my noble professors and the soldiers in Kirsch, but I only became busier when I came here.

“For an ancient dragon to appear in a human habitat, though... That is quite a rare occurrence. Where in the world did it wander in from...? Not only that, but I hear that it was identical to the Guardian Dragon of Huzak. Is something unsavory happening in that land, perhaps?”

“Oh, what are you saying? That thing originally started off as dirt in a dungeon. There is no logic or reason in their actions,” a nobleman replied with disdain. “Oh, this is delightful.”

With a glass of water in one hand, I tuned out the people around me. *If I don't, my mind will be fatigued and I'll end up getting thinner from stress, you know!*

Ugh, and that guy! How dare he take the meat I was aiming for! Damn it, there isn't much left! I sighed inwardly once again. *These people just stuff their faces without a care in the world. They don't know how I feel!*

A long and loud growl echoed out.

“What was that sound...?”

“It was the sound of my stomach. What about it?” I said with a tone daring them to comment on it.

Hey, what’s there to laugh at about me trying to lose weight? Don’t bother me anymore. Leave me alone. If anything, just let me go back to my room!

“You over there! Bring some food for the Dragon Slayer!” a man ordered.

“I am fine. I am on a diet, so please do not worry about me,” I declined.

A maid came up to me with a plate. “Apologies for the wait, Lord Denning. Here is your two-hundred-gram pork loin. This dish is low in calories.”

That was fast! The maids in Kirsch can’t even compare to the people here in terms of speed! At school, the maids seemed to put everything into their work, but the maids here are fast and graceful. But I’m on a diet.. Jeez, is this a torture session or something? All the foods on display are my favorites, darn it! No, I must resist! I’m on a diet, after all!

...Okay, should I just eat it now? Do I go for the finish? Do I snort and munch like crazy? All right, feast time! I’ll dig in! It’s a reward for me! Aaah!!!!!!!!!!

“Oh my!!! So here you were! Please, tell me your stories!” a young noblewoman gushed and approached me.

“Ah! My daughter, this gentleman over here is the famous Slowe Denning himself. He’s the Dragon Slayer we have heard all about!” a nobleman said.

Just when I thought the onslaught of nobles was over, a few slightly older ladies dressed in glamorous clothing approached me, asking me to recount my tale. One by one, they encircled me, and my diet was rescued by a hair’s breadth.

“Yes, I do know of you. You are the Prodigy of Wind, are you not?”

However...well, in exchange, I felt a pair of eyes drilling holes into my back. I glanced over at the spot where *she* probably was as I felt cold sweat trickling down my skin.

The girl in question was glaring at me, looking like she had swallowed a lemon. My retainer Charlotte was the only commoner attending this banquet, and very few people came up to her for a chat.

The nobles were busy making connections with each other. That left Charlotte to enjoy the taste of the exquisite cuisine in her mouth while glaring at me.

“Oh my, how brave, crossing the forest path all by yourself. I heard that even the famous Order itself had trouble with it! Were you not scared?”

“Um, well...I was just really focused on getting through,” I said.

After that night, when I confessed to Charlotte that I knew her past...

Since that very moment, our relationship only took a turn for the worse.

“Everyone, please look at his arm! Even though it looks all wobbly, there’s definitely a mass of muscle...” the lady trailed off.

Please give me a chance to explain myself. I had intended to patch things up after that.

“Well, not really...but there’s something cute about it!” the lady continued.

But I had been immediately surrounded by a sea of people like how I was now, and Royal Knights came as reinforcements from Yoram. After taking down the dragon, I had been so busy that I didn’t even have time to sleep, and...I ended up leaving Charlotte hanging in the air like that...

A few days later, we passed by each other and she whispered to me, “You came out with such a major truth but you won’t make time for me. Why? Are you blind to how I would feel? Even if I don’t look like it, I *am* a princess, you know...”

I had felt a shiver go through my whole body when she said that. After that, even if I tried to talk to her, she had started ignoring me, and, well... In the carriage on our way to the capital, Charlotte had looked so anxious and like she was deep in thought. I couldn’t talk to her if she was in that kind of mood. Right now, I wasn’t sure what Charlotte was thinking.

“You are so adorable, but you’re a Dragon Slayer! You really can’t judge a book by its cover, can you?” Another lady nodded.

“Shall we talk over there? Just the two of us.”

“Oh my, are you trying to get a head start?!” another gasped with disbelief.

I did have an idea of what she was thinking, though. My actions surely reminded her of her past, so she was probably thinking about her home country. Specifically, she was probably thinking about White Castle where she was born and raised, and what it must be like now. Or, maybe, she was thinking about the state of her country and her memories there.

Yet, I was currently leaving her to the side as I was fawned over by countless ladies, even though she had many worries on her mind. *That’s a big red flag to anyone with morals.*

“Yikes,” I muttered at what I saw.

Charlotte stabbed her roast beef with no emotion whatsoever on

her face, lifted her fork, and chewed on the meat. Lather, rinse, and repeat. Whenever Charlotte was stressed, she had a habit of binge eating silently. I only recently discovered this fact.



Oh no! Now she's gloomily stuffing sweet desserts into her mouth. Charlotte, no! Don't! You'll become obese! Damn it! When you're overeating, it's surprisingly hard to gauge that yourself! Trust me, I know!
So—

“Charlotte! If you eat more than that, you'll grow fat!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” I yelled at the top of my lungs.

I was desperate and it seemed like the only thing I could do, since I couldn't move from the circle of ladies around me.

Due to my outburst, people started staring at Charlotte. She froze, dessert in her hand. Then, chuckles began to sound out from all over...

“Who is this ‘Charlotte’? Oh, that girl, I see.”

“My, my! That girl is the Dragon Slayer's retainer, if my memories serve me right. I see that she doesn't seem to be used to the dazzling world of nobles.”

Charlotte realized what was happening and her cheeks flushed crimson. *But please, don't be mad at me*, I pleaded in my mind. *I can't move from here.*

However, Charlotte did not respond to that plea of mine. She ate the rest of the dessert in her hands in one big bite and ran away from the hall at lightning speed. Just before she made her escape, our eyes locked. In other words, she gave me a big glare.

Oh...it looks like I've crossed the worst possible line in her mind.

Daryth City was a fortress city that was on a completely different scale from Yoram.

Stars glittered like scattered jewels in the sky above, and their faint light lit up the vast castle town below. I was standing on a balcony overlooking the capital, which was still well lit even at night. The chilly wind brushed over my whole body.

Meanwhile, Princess Carina was staring at the night city and spacing out. I hadn't expected her to be at the banquet, but she had appeared out of nowhere. I kept my silence, watching over her.

The princess's appearance had not been part of the plan and it caused quite a stir in the hall. Their reactions weren't surprising, considering that the princess was a moody person who didn't often show up at such occasions. However, it seemed that the princess of Daryth had no interest in the ball at all, and she had led me by the hand out onto the balcony. To be frank, she really saved me there.

“Princess Carina, just how much longer do I have to continue with such things...?” I felt a moment of weakness spill out of my mouth.

I hadn't thought that it would be so suffocating to be surrounded by calculating nobles. If there had been at least one person I knew, like someone associated with House Denning or one of my former

friends around, then I would have had a lot less weight on my shoulders.

I thought back about some of my friends from the past: the serious Claude, the free-spirited Silva, the hot-blooded Marco, and the wayfaring Roswell. There were many people who had put me on a pedestal because I was pretty much guaranteed to be the next duke, but those four were the only friends I could trust from the bottom of my heart. I had been able to reunite with one of the four, Silva, but...right now, that guy was currently confined to the Academy for research purposes and data about the Mystical Sword of Wind.

"You don't look so happy, Slowe," the princess noted. "Did you not have fun at the ball?"

"This kind of thing really just does not sit well with me. I've really seen that fact for myself now. If I had the choice, I would return to Kirsch immediately."

"That's not possible. You changed the element of the Mystical Sword, a national treasure, and then you managed to pull off slaying a dragon, which nobody could have predicted. You must remain in the castle until my mother returns."

"Would Sir Delfrey cut me down because I tampered with the Mystical Sword?"

"Despite the rumors, the current Guardian Knight is actually quite an understanding person. And there's no way he would cut you down now. Slowe, you're a *hero*. Remember the masses of people who crowded around the castle in the daytime just to get a glimpse of you? That was pretty crazy, wasn't it?" Princess Carina said.

"Indeed. I honestly did not expect this treatment when I came here. Rumors sure spread fast," I said.

"Well, we're talking about a Dragon Slayer here. That kind of thing is straight out of a fairy tale."

Many commoners had heard rumors that the Dragon Slayer would visit the city, and today the capital had been in pure chaos.

Princess Carina hesitated before she continued. "Well, I don't think you have to put so much thought into it. The Great Spirit of Light and the Guardian Knight might be a little upset about it, but nobody can mess with the hero who protected Kirsch. Plus, my mother probably likes you, Slowe."

"Huh? L-Likes?" I stammered.

"You'll see when you meet with her," she said. "Wait, what? But you're that... You were House Denning's famous Prodigy of Wind. Haven't you spoken with her in the past?"

"Only a little. I have also changed a lot since back then..."

In the end, I suppose there was no point in trying to predict how things would go from here. The person with the most political

influence in this country was currently visiting various countries in the south, so she wasn't in the castle right now. Apparently, it would still be nearly half a month before she made her return, so I probably didn't have any choice other than to wait patiently for the final verdict.

And about that... What's going to happen to my life from now on? I probably have no place in House Denning anymore. Even if my father takes my side, House Denning is too big to sway from just that.

In contrast to the skies with stars shining brilliantly in the night, I couldn't see my future at all. *What...will happen to me?*

"Oh, right. I wanted to ask you something," she trailed off.

If I wanted a luxurious life, I guess becoming Princess Carina's Guardian Knight would be a valid option? But it's pretty unsettling times out there, so... Oh. I just remembered. Back then, during all the chaos, I hugged this person... I mean, this lady. I was really focused on dealing with the dragon back then, but still, was that out of line? Ugh, no, stop thinking about that! Don't remember stuff like how her body felt against you back then or anything!

With the gentle glow of the moon casting down on her, the princess stared at the bustling capital below us.

I tried to hide my internal struggle by keeping a blank face on the surface. After a short while, Princess Carina looked at me, puzzled. "Hey, why are you making such a weird face all of a sudden?"

"No, it's nothing." I changed the topic. "So, what did you want to ask?"

"Did something happen between you and your retainer? That interesting earthworm girl, I mean."

I froze for a second. "Huh? Nothing happened. Wait, earthworm...? What in the world is your impression of her?"

"I heard that you two hadn't had a proper conversation until you came to the capital, even though you were so close back in Kirsch. Is she perhaps jealous since you suddenly became a hero hailed by all? As for that description, well, that's because the earthworm was very memorable."

"I do not think it would be anything like jealousy..."

"Oh, really?" She raised an eyebrow. "I hear that Kirsch is currently on holiday, but is she going to return to her homeland too? I had the impression that retainers are always with their masters, though."

"Charlotte will not return to her homeland. Sorry, but I cannot tell you the details..."

Ever since I had revealed the truth, things had been awkward between Charlotte and me. My lie had been for her sake. However, we *still* hadn't managed to have a proper conversation since I was heaps

busier than back in Kirsch. It was unexpected on my part because I thought I would have time to talk to her before the queen returned. *Who would have thought that even Princess Carina would notice this rift between us, though?*

"Seems pretty complicated," she commented. "But, well, surely time will solve all your problems."

"Princess Carina, where did you learn such mature-sounding words?"

"...Are you making fun of me?!"

Though Princess Carina said that time would solve my problems...the biggest problem I had right now would be tricky to solve that way. No matter how you put it, I had deceived Charlotte for a long time.

The biggest reason this problem got so out of hand was probably the fact that I left her hanging without patching things up properly immediately after I revealed my secret. It would have gone way better if I had actually had, well, a more proper conversation with her back then, but.. I sighed inwardly.

Oh, what should I do? If I remember correctly, when Alicia was upset in the anime, Shuya gave her presents. But I don't know what Charlotte would want in her current state... If I were still in Kirsch, I could have asked someone like Tina for advice and seen if she could fish out information discreetly from Charlotte, but, well, I'm not.

"Dragon Slayer!" A lady came up to me, giggling. "Would you like to have tea with us today?"

"My deepest apologies, but I am fully booked today," I replied.

"Ah, you are quite the busy one. I see, Dragon Slayer."

I only had myself to rely on to patch up my relationship with Charlotte. That was exactly why I thought this was my only chance when I saw her walking in my direction, a book hugged close to her chest. I had a session booked with the Royal Knights coming up very soon where they would ask me about the Mystical Sword element change. However, there was no way I could let this opening go.

"Charlotte," I called out to her hesitantly.

I felt eyes on me. It seemed like Charlotte had noticed me and our eyes met. I hurriedly ran her way. She stood next to a big window, light flowing in from it. The warm air felt like a sign of the upcoming summer.

I hadn't seen Charlotte's face up close for a while like this. And just like I thought, she was angry.

"Master Slowe," she began slowly. "I believe you owe me an apology."

That was the first thing she said to me. *Something I owe her an*

apology for... Yeah, she's definitely talking about that.

"I know I'm in the wrong. But there is one thing I want to make clear. I did it for you—"

"Not that." She cut me off. "No, I mean, that's part of it, but more importantly... Think about how many years we were together."

I was silent.

"For a long time. A long, looong time! I had aaalllways been with you, even after you gained a small loose screw or two, and yet!!!" she exclaimed. "I'm sad! At first, I was surprised that you knew my secret, but then I immediately started feeling depressed, thinking that you didn't trust me at all!"

"Th-That's not true!" I protested. "That's not the case at all!"

"And that isn't all!"

"Huh? Other than the fact that I knew, is there anything else I have to apologize for?"

"You said I would grow fat yesterday!" Charlotte exclaimed. "Do I look fat to you?!"

"N-No, but, well, you ate a lot, so I was worried, and..." I trailed off.

"Well, that is none of your business!" Charlotte snapped. "I mean, I really shouldn't say this about myself, but I'm quite slim! Also, Master Slowe, you *know* who I am, right?! I am an esteemed princess—Fweh!"

H-Hold up! Those are some dangerous waters you're heading into! I immediately covered Charlotte's mouth with my hand.

"Charlotte, what are you going to do if someone overhears you?!" I hissed.

I insisted that we would be in hot water if someone overheard and Charlotte calmed down slightly.

"It's not like I want to be pampered like a princess or anything. I know that it's impossible now; too much time has passed. It's impossible for there to be any royal princesses good at cleaning and cooking in this world, after all."

I took a moment to process that. "Uh." *Um, I think you probably can find one if you look. Wait. Did she just say that she was good at cooking?*

"What's with that face, Master Slowe?" Charlotte muttered with dissatisfaction.

"Ah, well, it's nothing."

Then there was silence. We hadn't even had the opportunity to meet each other face-to-face up until now. This conversation was too sudden and I hadn't braced myself for it yet, so I didn't know what to say to Charlotte.

She is a real princess, you know? Though her country no longer

existed, in terms of status, she was someone out of reach for someone like me.

“Charlotte, I’m sorry that I kept my silence about your secret. So please, give me an opportunity to repent for my actions.”

Charlotte went silent for a moment before speaking again.

“Well...”

Then, these words spilled forth from her lips. “In that case, I want to go back.”

“To Huzak?”

Charlotte hesitated. “Yes.”

“That’s... I’m sorry. That’s impossible.” The moment I said that, Charlotte lost some of her cheerfulness.

She should have known that, though. Huzak was filled with endless perils in its current state. There was no way I could promise her so lightly that we could go there like a picnic outing. It was a place where even fully trained soldiers had to make thorough preparations before sneaking across the border. There was no way a lacking mage like Charlotte could go.

Immediately after Huzak had been occupied by a group of vampires, the best soldiers in Daryth had made their way to White Castle but had been unable to even recapture it due to the fierce resistance of monsters.

That wasn’t all. Charlotte should know this too. Even if she returned to her homeland now...none of the people she knew back then would be there.

“You already know this, but your homeland is currently occupied by fearsome monsters. The only people who go there are adventurers and soldiers dispatched as scouts, and there are no citizens left there.”

“I...I know that.”

“Then, why?”

Charlotte took a long while before she answered. “The Great Spirit is with me. If I borrow their power, then—”

“Charlotte. The Great Spirit denied your request, am I right?” I said with conviction.

“That’s...” Charlotte trailed off.

Altanger didn’t like using their powers. I didn’t know the reason behind it, but I didn’t think that they would defeat Huzak’s monsters and help Charlotte return to her homeland. The Great Spirit seemed to really treasure Charlotte, but I was pretty sure of what they would do. Looking at it realistically, it was impossible to go to Huzak.

“Ah, so there you are, Lord Denning!” An unfamiliar noble approached me.

Ugh, can’t you see that I’m in the middle of something right now? Read the room, damn it!

“Just now, I overheard that you were talking about a princess or something,” the man said.

“Huh? Oh, uh, it might have been your imagination, I think?!” I said, panicked.

“No, I heard it with my very own ears. Do you possibly have plans with Princess Carina soon, perhaps? If it is all right with you, shall I accompany you? Do not worry, you can count on me to entertain Her Highness. Ever since she was young, I have—”

“Ah, Charlotte!” I yelled. While I was talking with the noble whose name I didn’t even know, Charlotte quickly disappeared from the vicinity.

For your information, I am not talking about Princess Carina. The princess we were talking about was the girl earlier. Princess Charlotte, who went off just now with a sad look on her face...

“I have somewhere to go after this. I am very sorry, but I must take my leave—” I cut him off.

I heaved a deep sigh. “Even if it’s what Charlotte wants, that request is...”

No matter how many times I thought about it, it was an impossible task.

Periodically, the army would send out a squadron of soldiers and scout for anything that seemed amiss in the monster-filled Huzak. Back before I decided to change for the better, I had secretly read some of the reports from the expeditions. There were reports of powerful monsters living around her home city of White Castle, and news that there was a village of orcs in the colossal Tob Forest, among other bits of information.

“My word... Look at him. How repulsive,” a voice filled with distaste whispered.

Oh wow, I’m hearing some hushed whispers again. When stuff like this happens, I just can’t help but be curious, thinking that they might be bad-mouthing me behind my back. It’s probably a nasty side effect of my dark ages as the Piggy Duke.

However, the ladies weren’t talking about me.

“Who does he think he is? Soldiers are such barbaric people,” another lady added.

“This is a completely different world from where those military aristocrats crawled out from,” yet another muttered with scorn.

A young man wearing a splendid military uniform was walking down the corridor. He had probably rushed here with haste as his otherwise admirable uniform was sullied. His mouth, meanwhile, was pressed into a thin line.

The government officials of the castle made faces of disgust as

they looked at him. However, the young soldier kept the serious expression on his face and only looked forward, ignoring all the words thrown his way. He must have headed straight to the capital from the battlefield.

Ugh, these people... Do they even know who's actually protecting this country? Hmm, judging by the rank insignia on his clothes, he's a commissioned officer, a platoon leader to be specific. I might know him.

On a whim, I looked at his face, and—

I *did* know him. Before I knew it, my body had moved on instinct.

“This is...a *Heal* spell? Who in the world...?” the man muttered.

“If you’re going to come to the castle, Marco, don’t show up looking like that. You’ll be an object of ridicule,” I said.

Marco was from a baron house and one of my father’s favorites. He had often played with me in the past. He was a passionate man who couldn’t turn a blind eye to evil. If my memories were right, he was the same age as Silva, and he often picked fights with the other man, saying that he was stronger.

There was a pause before Marco spoke up. “Let the dogs of the royal palace laugh all they want. I do not care. My life is on the battlefield and not in the capital. More importantly, I heard about your dragon-slaying in Kirsch, Young Master. Right now, talk of your feat can be heard everywhere as a story to spice up the wine, and—”

“Save that for later. Why are you here? You were selected for the undercover investigation of Huzak, weren’t you?”

“You are very well-informed,” Marco said at length.

My father had high hopes for Marco’s talents, so he had been tasked with an important mission in Huzak. If there was the need for it, Marco was to infiltrate Huzak with a platoon following his lead, and they were to check on the monsters there.

In my memories, Marco had always been cheerful and kind. However, he looked haggard right now.

“I am a terrible, terrible man. I deserted my comrades, and...I have returned shamelessly all by myself.”

“What happened?”

Marco began his report. In the middle of his usual mission, he had met a strange human in Huzak and it immediately escalated into a battle. Then, his troops were decimated. Despite him being their commanding officer, Marco’s older comrades let him escape.

“Marco. Are you sure that the human who attacked you was from Dustour?”

“I am. Such an ominous aura could only belong to someone from the Dustour Empire!”

I froze. *That’s... Wait, that’s... Oh no. What do I do? I completely*

forgot about it, but a Dustour soldier in Huzak... That's exactly what happened in the anime!!! This is bad. This is reeeal bad. This isn't the time to be putting all my efforts into my weight! Considering the timeline, it's nearly the time that the main story of the anime starts!

This means...the war is going to start, and I will be sent crashing into a bad end where I'll be separated from Charlotte.

"Young Master. As a soldier, desertion is punishable by death. There is no need to wait for a verdict. In the absence of the queen, I shall directly report to the princess and depart to where all my comrades are. I am prepared to face the consequences."

"No, hold up! Wait! You managed to survive, right?! You don't have to make such a conviction!"

"However! I deserted!!!" Marco yelled.

"Uh, well, listen, Marco. You're a talented soldier who became a commanding officer of a squad at such a young age. Despite that fact, your enemy was so strong that you couldn't do a thing against them, right? On top of that, losing you would be a severe loss for the army. My father would have the same opinion as me, I am sure of it." I tried to reason with him.

"Anyone could replace someone...someone so terrible as me!!!"

"Hey, keep it down! This isn't the battlefield, you know! Lower your voice!"

If everything went according to the anime, Shuya would make use of the long holiday to head to Zenelaus. However, Shuya was an idiot, so he would try to cut across Huzak, claiming that this route would save him time. Alicia would follow him, practically running away from home.

Oh yeah. In the anime, Shuya practically lived in the library for a while before he departed, so that he could learn about Huzak. Drat, I should have kept track of his actions! If he's acting just like how he did in the anime, oooh boy...

"Marco, you do not have to die to take responsibility for it. You can just fight them again and win the next time!"

"I see! Then I must return to Huzak immediately!"

"No, what are you saying?!" I exclaimed. "You came here to give a report to Princess Carina, right?! You have to let her know that a soldier of Dustour might have snuck into Huzak!!!"

The first twelve or so episodes of *Shuya Marionette* began with a certain red-haired guy looking to become more powerful and invading a country ruled by monsters after his peaceful school life arc ended. However, due to his lack of foresight, he was immediately captured by orcs and dragged off to their residence.

In the orc village, the anime's protagonist and the heroine were driven into a corner with no escape. However, their lives were spared

thanks to a pixie who sought peace with the humans and they began a wonderful yet odd friendship with the monsters in the orc village.

However, those halcyon days quickly came to an end. A soldier from the Dustour Empire attacked Shuya and his companions when they went sightseeing in White Castle. The man that Marco had encountered was probably that same exact soldier.

“Young Master, I shall report to Princess Carina and go undercover to infiltrate Huzak once again,” Marco said to me, determined.

“I’m going with you. If I leave you on your own right now, I have no idea what kind of weird plan you might come up with.”

I knew the true identity of that soldier from the anime, and even knew what he hoped to achieve in Huzak. That man was a soldier who had the absolute trust of the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij, who strove to unite the continent.

He was currently undercover in Huzak to eliminate the soldiers of Daryth and Cirquista lying in wait there, as well as adventurers of the Freedom Union who went to the land for a dungeon-like challenge. This was all in order to gauge the power of the south.

In the anime, he met Shuya near White Castle and gained an interest in him. He was a rather temperamental person who marched to the beat of his own drum, purposely pointing out Shuya’s weaknesses many times and doing things that seemed to push the young man’s growth.

I suppose he was like a rival for the protagonist on the enemies’ side? Shuya would lose to him many times, but the man was more like a wall that Shuya was meant to overcome. However, one thing was clear: there was no way Shuya could even put up a fight against that guy in the student’s current state. *That soldier is in Huzak now...* My cheerful mood from being the Dragon Slayer immediately soured like a lemon.

An endless stream of thoughts continued to churn away in my mind as I walked side by side with Marco, and then...

“You have changed,” Marco said after a pause. “It is almost as if I am talking to the young master from the past.”

“I have. I did lose weight, after all.”

Marco formed a wry smile on his lips, saying, “That is not what I am referring to, though.”

But if he’s talking about how I’ve changed, what is there to point at other than my weight?

We finally arrived at the audience room. Princess Carina and her tutor, the Cardinal, sat in the spots the queen and her Guardian Knight would usually take. Behind Marco and me were the Royal Knights,

lined up in formation and wearing their signature white capes. The contrast between the knights' uniforms and Marco's tattered one was like night and day.

Having received Marco's report, Princess Carina frowned as she was deep in thought. This was all because he had requested that she allow him to infiltrate Huzak once again.

"Excuse me, may I interrupt for a second?" I asked.

Princess Carina was quiet for a while before she replied to me. "Slowe? Ah, am I supposed to call you Lord Denning in times like this...? Oh well, my mother isn't here right now so it doesn't matter. What is it?"

Still, how could I have forgotten about all this? If I just enjoyed a blissful life without a care and didn't lift a finger, the events of the anime would have unfolded. If the war begins just like it did there...I would be guaranteed to be sent to the front lines. Bringing Charlotte into the midst of war is out of the question, and there's also the very real possibility that I might die a lonely death on the battlefield. That's a future I absolutely, definitely want to avoid!

"In that case... If you are looking for a suitable candidate, there's one right in front of your eyes, Princess Carina. I can infiltrate Huzak and scout information about the man who decimated Marco's squad."

"Y-Young Master!" Marco exclaimed. "Do you understand what you are offering?! If anything happened to you, I could never hold my head up before everyone in House Denning again! It is blasphemy to make you clean up after my shameful mistake!"

"I think it's the opposite. If something happened to me, many would probably rejoice. And that isn't all, Marco. I believe that everything I have said is correct. Father told me to live like how a member of House Denning should. Therefore, I should act, don't you think?"

After all, my father *had* been angry at me, saying I shouldn't think that mere dragon-slaying could make up for everything I had done up until now.

"It is my duty to defeat that man!" Marco argued. "Even if you are the young master, I cannot let you do this!"

"Your hot-blooded side never changes..." I muttered. "I suggest that you learn from the levelheaded Royal Knights, even just a little. Look at those guys. It's written all over their faces that they wouldn't want to infiltrate Huzak themselves, even if someone begged them to go. Ah, pardon me, I didn't mean anything by that. I am just trying to cool this man down. As you can tell, his sense of responsibility is too strong."

For his age, Marco was a soldier with quite a high station. I could tell that just by looking at him, and the fact that he was in charge of a

dangerous area like Huzak only supported that theory. In this country, the higher you were on the hierarchy of the army, the more often you were sent to the front lines. This was because of the influence of House Denning. *Well, if you aren't liked by the people of my house in the first place, then there's no way you could get far in the army.*

"Princess Carina, as you can see, Marco isn't being rational due to the loss of his subordinates. His mind is far from being clear. I fear that if he meets the man in question again in Huzak, history will only repeat itself," I declared.

"Your Highness! Please, you cannot let this happen! The young master is the treasure of House Denning, and he is still a student learning at Kirsch! It would be ridiculous to send him somewhere like Huzak!" Marco pleaded.

"What are you saying?" I cocked an eyebrow and addressed Marco. "I'm the famous Dragon Slayer, ya know?"

"Uh, um... M-Maldini, what should I do in a situation like this? Mother never taught me how to handle something like *this*, and, um... It's a little too much...responsibility for me..." Princess Carina stammered.

"Your Highness, Duke Denning has told me to treat him equally with his eldest brothers. Since that is the case, there is nothing to be conflicted about. All members of House Denning bear the weight of their fate on their backs," the Cardinal said.

Even if Daryth sent soldiers to Huzak now, they would only fall at the hands of the Dustour soldier. Marco probably thought that there were many soldiers there, but in truth, there was only one. The soldier, Rooney, had infiltrated Huzak all by himself to scout out the power of the south.

After he was satisfied with his findings, Rooney would report the worst outcome possible to the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij: the union of the continent could be carried out swiftly.

"Princess Carina," I began. "Huzak is currently under the rule of monsters. Thus, the best way to deal with the matter swiftly is to send in a select few who can adapt to a variety of situations. I am a Dragon Slayer and defeated a dragon by myself. There couldn't be anyone more fitting for the job. On top of that, my father would probably agree that this is the duty of a direct Denning descendant."

The Cardinal backed me up. "Your Highness, I believe it is best to leave the matter in his hands."

"Huh? But...Slowe isn't a soldier, and *you're* the one who said not to let him go anywhere else until my mother returns, Maldini. This is the complete opposite of what you said earlier."

The Cardinal was silent. Even though Marco was not privy to this

knowledge, I was the one who had captured No Face and Sepith. The Cardinal owed me big time.

The man in question took a moment before he spoke up again. "He is the Dragon Slayer. If he is on the case, and even if our opponents are the soldiers of Dustour, it would be a good match."

"Cardinal, are you in your right mind?! What in the world are you thinking?!" Marco yelled.

"Marco, remember what you said earlier? You said that I had changed," I reminded him. "I know that you can't sit still due to the loss of your subordinates, but you look like you could collapse at any moment now. Get some rest. Well then, Cardinal, shall we work out the finer details of this operation? There is no need to worry. I shall come back to the capital before the queen makes her return. Let's see... I believe two weeks or so would be enough."

"Dalton...escort the other man out," the Cardinal ordered.

Obedying his command, a few Royal Knights forcefully grabbed both of Marco's arms and led him outside.

"Young Master! Huzak is too dangerous for humans to enter! I speak from experience! I have seen how dreadful it is!"

I thought about Huzak, the residence of monsters. In the anime, when Shuya and Alicia thought back about what had happened when they'd tried to cut across the land, they always concluded that they had been too brash and were trying the impossible.

Well, that was only natural. Trying to do that was like a monster trying to sneak into the dining hall of Kirsch and grab a meal without the students finding out. It was equally ridiculous.

However, I was different from Shuya and Alicia. I wasn't going to take all the difficulties of Huzak head-on. In other words, I'd be lazy where I could. That was possible if I used the knowledge I possessed.

Thus, I was in this place by my own choice.

"We tried to interrogate the criminal about her *Transformation* spell, but she would not answer. She was quite difficult, even for us, almost like a feral, starved beast. More importantly, are you really sure that you wish to go by yourself?" the guard asked.

"It's not a problem. Ah, I will be fine by myself from here on out. I don't need the key either," I replied.

The guard saw me off as I advanced into the Great Prison of Daryth.

There was a hidden underground area of the castle where not even a single ray of light penetrated its walls. Within its depths, there was a concealed spiral staircase. If one were to walk down to the bottom floor, they would arrive at a corridor with stone paving, with an overall length probably spanning a few hundred meters.

An urban legend whispered on the streets spoke of the existence of a jail for prisoners underground in the castle. That rumor was actually true. As to why I was in this corridor that led to the jail...

“Who is it this time? No matter who comes, I won’t spill a...wor—” The speaker gasped.

The mercenary who had infiltrated Kirsch Mage Institute seemed to have thinned down quite a bit, yet her eyes held the same strong glint as before. I heard that she had been robbed of her wand and was neutralized, but...right now, she clasped her hands tightly around the bars, struggling angrily to reach out her hand and grab me.

Let me state my impression objectively. That scared the living daylights out of me!!!!!! I had a feeling she’d be angry, but this was more than I ever imagined. The livid No Face, with her face as red as a tomato, was the mercenary who had snuck into Kirsch.

“Slowe Denning!” she spat my name. “How shameless of you to show yourself to me after all this time!”

On a list of the people whose fates I had ruined, she would be a likely contender for the number one spot. It seemed that Sepith was able to reflect on his actions and change, but this mercenary was probably different. In fact, she had apparently even tried to summon me from within the jail, saying that she had no intention of saying anything until she talked to me. *That information never reached me though, so there was nothing I could do about it.*

“At Kirsch, you implied that you knew my real identity! Just how much do you know about me?!” she yelled.

I hesitated. “Let’s put aside that question for now. Um... What would you do if I said I would put in my best effort to have you freed?”

There was no way around it; I had to pay a small price for what I needed to do, and in order to infiltrate Huzak, I needed her powers.

Her *Transformation* spell... Though nobody had realized it yet, the reason why this mercenary was able to use such a grand spell was thanks to a magical artifact. In terms of rarity, that artifact hid a power that even transcended the Mystical Sword, Daryth’s national treasure, by leaps and bounds.

I would make use of all my power to try and stop the war before the anime’s events would unfold. At this point, I wouldn’t hesitate to join hands with a villain.

The anger in her eyes visibly faded. “...On what conditions?”

It was probably because a different emotion overpowered her anger. *Should have expected nothing less from No Face. She’s able to adapt quickly.* “I want you to lend me your magical artifact.”

There was a long stretch of silence before No Face spoke again.

“As I thought, you do know about it. Why do you know my real identity?”

“Because I saw that in the anime, oink.”

“Hah?” She uttered in a murderous tone. “I’ll kill you if you keep that up. Answer me seriously.”

I had answered her sincerely, though. How was I supposed to explain everything to her in the first place? If I claimed that I knew the future, people might force me into some strange hospital.

“I don’t owe you an answer,” I said instead. “However, you should also have your own duties to carry out. At this rate, you would die a death with only regrets and vexation in your heart. That is, until the day you are able to take revenge on the Great Spirit of Fire, Eldred, who burned your homeland to the ground.”

“...Just how much *do* you know?” she muttered.

“Well, I don’t know your favorite food, for one.” *But I know many things about you. Like the fact that No Face is actually a former noble, and that she hated Eldred.*

No Face tried and failed to put aside her shock, unable to bring back her calm demeanor. In fact, her fear was controlling her, and I could understand that. This was a normal reaction since the secrets hidden deep in her heart were splayed open by my words. In her eyes, this pig of a stranger knew about her dream... Her impossible dream of striking Eldred from this world entirely.

“Well, then. Are you going to take the deal or not? Tell me.”

When I returned to the surface from the underground prison, the bright sunlight nearly blinded me for a second.

I now wore a black ring on my finger. With this item, not only was the infiltration of Huzak possible, but... *I might even be able to get close to White Castle.* This ring solved the problem of how I would get into Huzak.

Only an idiot would fight their way into Huzak without a plan so that they could take a shortcut to save time on their trip to Zenelaus. Like Shuya.

“Master Slowe!”

In this place full of stern soldiers, my name was called out by a girl who didn’t seem to fit in. The soldiers seemed curious about her identity, but once they realized she was affiliated with me and House Denning, that seemed to be enough for them.

“You’re fast, Charlotte,” I said. “As for why I called you here, well... I suppose you have the general gist of it already?”

I had made a request to a Royal Knight to call Charlotte all the way here. Judging from the serious look on her face, she must have

heard most of it from the Royal Knight.

"I heard that you are going to Huzak! But first, is Mister Marco okay?"

"He's doing fine. His passion hasn't changed at all, and he stubbornly insisted that I bring him to Huzak until the last second."

Marco had asked me many times to bring him along, even as nothing more than a mere guide. However, I firmly declined his offer. He had a grudge against Rooney. If Marco suddenly acted out of line when he saw the man, it would be an unacceptable turn of events, so...

However, it was different with Charlotte. Our relationship was currently pretty complicated, so it wouldn't be wrong for me to choose to go to Huzak alone. After all, it *was* a foreign land where monsters walked around like they owned the place. Charlotte, who didn't yet qualify as a fully-fledged mage, would only get in the way.

"Uh, and then... While Marco was scouting out Huzak, a suspicious man attacked him and his squad was decimated. Thus, I was tasked with investigating what was going on in that land, and that about sums it up."

"But Master Slowe, until you meet the queen..." Charlotte trailed off.

"Princess Carina gave me two weeks of freedom. It may be short, but I'll see to the end of it in that period," I declared.

"Only *two weeks*? Right now, Huzak is..."

"I know. Even so, as a member of House Denning, I must go. Charlotte, I know this is very sudden, but please, I want you to answer this question of mine immediately."

Something was stirring in her monster-ruled homeland. Right now, during this time that hinted at the start of the anime's events... These two months were the very best chance to prevent the war.

"Master Slowe. Earlier, you said that Huzak was full of monsters, and it's practically impossible to infiltrate..."

"I did. That's why I chose to join hands with a villain. I don't know how this will end up, but at least I have an idea of how I would sneak in."

"That's... Um, what do you mean?"

"Due to certain reasons, I can't tell you right now. I will enter your homeland in a way that even you couldn't imagine in your wildest dreams. Right now, what I want to know is...are you going to come with me, or not? If you aren't, then I'll go alone. That's all there is to it."

The Dustour soldier was in a whole other league from No Face and Sepith. Even Silva equipped with the Mystical Sword had a high chance of losing against him. In all honesty, I was looking at a steep,

uphill road filled with thorns. However, to stop the anime events that would lead to the war, I needed to beat him to a pulp and make him think that uniting the continent was difficult.

“When...do you leave?” Charlotte asked slowly.

“Right now, if possible. I’m planning on making the preparations at our destination.”

“Right now? That’s...super sudden.”

To Charlotte, this must have felt like a roller-coaster ride. I had only just denied her request a short time ago.

That might not have been all either. Even though she said she wanted to return to her homeland, she may have thought that the idea wasn’t realistic. After all, the consensus was that Huzak was a fearsome, eldritch land filled with nonhuman creatures, ruled by a clan of vampires.

Despite those facts, she said these next words bravely.

“I will go as well. So please, take me with you.”

Our relationship currently had a large crack in it. I couldn’t hope that we would work well together, and our goals were very different. Charlotte wanted to return to White Castle, the place she was born. As for me, once in Huzak, I would change the future.

Both of our goals were guaranteed to be extremely challenging missions.

Chapter 2: Huzak

“You only have two weeks, but you’ve holed yourself up in an unoccupied house... I’ve been wondering what you’ve been doing, but who would have thought... Master Slowe! Transforming into a monster is impossible! Stop trying to deny reality and claiming that the preparations are done!!!!!”

I want to become smarter than I am now. I want to be faster at running. I want to be stronger. Everyone probably has thought something like this at least once in their life. People dreamed of a bright, hopeful future. Then, one day, they would realize their own limits.

However, this was a world where the impossible could be made possible—a world of magic.

Many mages would willingly use their lives as a bargaining chip to manifest certain spells even in this day and age. The three most common were *Resurrection*, *Flight*, and *Transformation*.

“Unless we are able to do something as extreme as changing our appearances, Charlotte, it’s impossible for us to act freely in Huzak. Especially at your destination, White Castle. It’s deep in Huzak, near the border with the north.”

Charlotte was silent for a moment before she spoke up again. “I *could* just make a request to the Great Spirit.”

“That spirit is certainly on your side, but they wouldn’t attack monsters just because you want to see White Castle. Remember how they didn’t lift a finger during the horde invasion at Kirsch until the very end?”

“That’s... That might be the case, but...”

Charlotte, you might not know this yet, but that black cat dozing off on the bed... They really aren’t good for anything at all.

“If I were invading Huzak by myself, I could manage, somehow. However, if I needed to constantly watch over a mage who had finally just started to properly manifest spells, it would be a little rough. We’d end up running back here and unable to do a thing like the punchline of a joke. The past few days have been good evidence of that, like when you tried heading into Huzak by yourself. You couldn’t take a single step forward because the monsters across the border scared you silly, right?”

“...Then do you think that you have any chance at success with

the spell you're trying to perform, Master Slowe?"

"I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think I did."

Transformation was a grand spell that mages dreamed of achieving. The power to change one's appearance as they pleased was a miraculous goal that everyone yearned for at least once in their life.

Charlotte had declared with confidence that it was a pipe dream, but I wondered about that. *Wasn't there a mercenary who snuck into Kirsch using a Transformation spell recently? Ah, wait. I see. Back then, Charlotte didn't see her up close.*

"It's not impossible, Charlotte, meow. If you use that repulsive tool Slowe has, it might be successful, meow." The Great Spirit finally chimed in.

Charlotte was quite polite when addressing the spirit. "Huh? What do you mean, Great Spirit? Oh, um, you were awake, I see."

"I was awake, meow. But Slowe, where did you get *that* from, meow?"

"It's a secret," I said.

Well, I did expect that the Great Spirit of Wind would notice the thing I had on me. Calling it repulsive, though? I guess it makes sense, considering how all the other Great Spirits despise the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij.

"You probably remember the incident with the mercenary in Kirsch, Charlotte. In the end, they announced that she was a master at disguise, but that isn't the whole truth. All right, and with that, I've finished my prep. Charlotte, don't move at all from your spot, okay?"

"Huh? Um, Master Slowe, I have no idea what you're getting at..." Charlotte trailed off, then began to talk to herself out loud. "Okay, so Master Slowe has been doing something secretly in an unoccupied house for the past few days, and it turns out that he was drawing a complicated magic circle and the like... So, those were all in preparation for a *Transformation* spell. But, that's definitely impossible, and..."

"It isn't that complicated. Basically, the mercenary No Face relied on a magical artifact to change her appearance. And now, that magical artifact is in my hands."

I took the bottle I had left on the table and let one drop splash onto the ground. The magic circle pulsed in reaction, and black smoke rose from the ground ominously. Then, the obsidian-black ring on the index finger of my left hand glowed with a dull light.

In exchange for my help in her release, I had borrowed this magical artifact from No Face. The mercenary, who had once been a noble, inherited this treasure from her family during a catastrophe.

"Wh-What's with this smoke...? Master Slowe, what in the world are you doing?!"

For the past few days, I had shut myself away like a hermit in a room of an abandoned house near our border with Huzak, putting all my efforts into fine-tuning this spell.

The area we were in was practically a treasure box loaded with abandoned houses. Even if some kind of mysterious light seeped out a little, there was no one around to care.

“P-Please explain what’s going on!” Charlotte exclaimed.

“You don’t have to worry, Charlotte, meow. It’s probably okay, meow,” the Great Spirit of Wind said.

“Great Spirit, what do you mean by ‘probably’?!” Charlotte exclaimed.

For this spell, the important thing was to truly believe in what I would become. *I’m an orc. I’m not a human. My arms and feet are thick and the color of pale, human skin, and I have a huge nose that looks like it could breathe in a lot of air. Picture it. I am a greasy orc... No, I don’t want that... Okay, a slightly cool...orc... Ugh, no, as long as I become an orc, anything is fine at this point! At any rate, I am an orc!*

And of course, Charlotte would become *that* specific kind of monster. Taking the girl in Huzak right now into consideration...*that* was definitely the only option!

“Great Spirit! There’s a crazed look in Master Slowe’s eyes. Is this really okay?”

“I think that’s due to his lack of sleep, meow. Now then, I’ll be off.”

“Ah, hey! They ran away!” Charlotte gasped.

Just you wait, Nanatrij’s favorite soldier. I’ll defeat you, no matter how outstanding you are, and I’ll send a message to the boss of the empire.

Once upon a time, the Great Spirit of Darkness secured victory over the elves that ruled over the north and won territory in the area. This capable Great Spirit then established Dustour, a new country of humans in the north. However, lately, the headstrong Nanatrij did as she pleased too often and had become an enemy of the south.

“Charlotte, don’t move! Calm down!” I yelled.

“That’s my line, Master Slowe! Come to your senses!”

Nanatrij...I’ll drive out your minion from Huzak, and I’ll change the future!



“I know we’ve become monsters, but who would have thought that we could enter the country so easily...?” I muttered.

We were at the entrance of a forest where light filtered through the canopy of leaves. We were currently taking a break as we looked over the vast field with lime-green grass before us.

Humans generally believed that the current state of Huzak was awful. If a human set foot there, it was said that the infamously cruel and underhanded northern vampires would attack them. However, that was only from the point of view of a human. Since we currently appeared to be monsters, Huzak's scenery was almost unbelievably peaceful.

Along the borders of the country, the monsters looked like they had a sharp and hungry look in their eyes. Up close, however, those same monsters were just enjoying a leisurely sunbath.

"I mean, if we looked like humans, we probably would have been attacked many times by now, but still..." I trailed off.

Charlotte, meanwhile, seemed shocked into silence due to the fact that Huzak was completely different from what she imagined.

Now then, I wanted to take this opportunity to talk to Charlotte about our plan going forward. However, it seemed that she was stunned by the current state of the country, so I supposed I should wait until she had calmed down from that state.

Even as a monster, her face was still just as cute and innocent as before, and I stared absentmindedly at her from the side. Charlotte had been trailing after my now-orc body, but she seemed grumpy the whole time. *Well, the clothes of a pixie are...ahem, so I suppose it's only natural...*

"Um... Master Slowe?"

I took a long time to carefully contemplate what would probably happen to this country and arrived at my conclusion. Charlotte would become a lady pixie! But still, that's... Isn't it cutting it too close? Is this really okay? Is this really okay-okay?

"Where do you think you are looking?!" Charlotte yelled.

It took a while before I could respond. "Huh?"

Charlotte was trembling, perhaps because she noticed my gaze. "No matter how many times I think about it, this is weird... Why am I wearing *that* kind of thing underneath these clothes...? Master Slowe, who do you think I am?! I might not seem like it, but technically, I'm an almighty princess! I did say that I didn't expect to be spoiled like a princess, but *this* is going too far!"

"C-Calm down, Charlotte." I tried to placate her. "It's all due to my analysis of the affairs of the monsters in this country, and soon, you'll definitely agree that it was a good choice to be a pixie! It's true, I swear, so please believe me!"

"Y-You can't deceive me! I *know* that you dog-eared a page in the monster encyclopedia! And I clearly remember the monsters there! I *remember* how you grumbled and lamented in the past that pixies didn't appear often in the south! This isn't the first time, you know! It's just like how you kept quiet about my secret the whole time! You

never tell me important things, do you?!”

Miss Pixie fired off consecutive rounds of disapproval towards my new orc body.

This isn't good! Charlotte was so quiet for so long because she was concerned about her clothes! And my dog-eared page?! Charlotte, you even paid attention to stuff like that?!

Her grievances towards me, which had probably been stewing and piling up for a long time, now spilled forth and showered over me.

“You should leave it at that, Charlotte, meow. It is better than becoming an orc, meow.”

“I guess, but... Uh. Oh, so you were awake...” Charlotte muttered.

I didn't expect the Great Spirit of Wind to give me a helping hand. *Wait, this spirit... Did they catch on to the fact that I'm spending a lot of mana to maintain our transformations...? I guess it's definitely possible since they're technically an oh-so-mighty Great Spirit.*

However, this was the only way. It might have been different if I were the only one going, but I didn't have a choice if I wanted to come with Charlotte. Thanks to our monstrous appearances, we were able to waltz around leisurely. Normally, entering Huzak would be an extremely arduous task.

All right. Charlotte seems to have calmed down, so it's about time we talk about the main topic.

“Charlotte, we will soon enter the colossal forest of Tob, a territory for monsters. My goal is to investigate the man who attacked Marco, and yours is to return to White Castle. Do I have everything down right?”

“Yes,” Charlotte replied at length.

“Then...for starters, I'll give you a brief rundown on the current situation in Huzak.”

“A rundown of Huzak, *now*? This far in?”

“Yes. I also didn't have full confidence that we wouldn't be attacked by monsters if we transformed ourselves, so I didn't explain in detail earlier. Now that we managed to enter safely, though, I want to tell you. So what I am about to say is the true state of Huzak that the public isn't privy to.”

To start off...people thought that Huzak was ruled by vampires, but even that very assumption was wrong.

I began. “Let's start with the monsters that attacked your homeland. Your home was attacked by the dungeon master of the A-rank dungeon located in what's now a territory of Dustour, North Ishlan... That was the Vampire of Gray, Sir Bloody, and he and his clan have already been exterminated. Currently, vampires don't rule over Huzak, but something else does.”

Charlotte was at a loss for words. I was glad that she was trying to listen to me with a rational mind, though. *Bit by bit...I will tell you what happened in your homeland.*

Charlotte finally spoke up. "Is that true?"

"It is. I mean, that isn't the whole reason for this, but doesn't Huzak come off completely different from the rumors that the vampires rule here with an iron fist of fear?"

"Why... Why isn't such important information well-known?"

"It's because the being that took down the fearsome Vampire of Gray isn't human."

"Not...a human? I don't understand what you're..."

"It was a monster. A monster hunted down the vampire who defeated a country. The monster who now rules Huzak has been asking for peace with the major countries in the south for a long time. However, no countries have been able to take them up on their offer. She is a monster with a little...no, with very complicated circumstances."

"What kind of monster could possibly defeat the vampires?"

It was only natural that she would ask this. The vampire's army had been a disastrous force, able to drive out the humans of Huzak in only a few days. However, they were no longer in this world. In that case, who defeated such beings?

"Have you heard of the pixie that has defied Dustour for a long time now?"

"Wait, you don't mean..."

"It's probably the one you're thinking of, Charlotte. To be more specific, the hero who was born as a pixie, known as the pixie with blue eyes, the Blue Light. The king of monsters who succeeded in joining hands with humans who opposed Dustour... *She* was the one who destroyed the vampires."

Everyone knew of her. She was the Demon King of the North, who currently reigned over the powerful monsters of the north and opposed the empire. Even while numerous countries were being swallowed up by the empire's forceful march, this pixie was the only monster who could fight on even ground with the Three Musketeers of Dustour.

"Apparently, those vampires originally came south because they disagreed with the Demon King of the North, who chose to form an alliance with humans. However, their attack on Huzak probably was an unforgivable act that went against the will of the Demon King of the North, and she couldn't leave such outrage alone. I hear that the vampires were all decimated in one night."

"...Why didn't you tell me?"

"Of course, I intended to tell you. However, the destruction of the

vampires happened quite a long time ago, back when you were far from a healthy mental state. You definitely weren't in a condition where I could talk about your homeland."

Back then, Charlotte was, well, depressed. I had thought that telling her information about her homeland would be too painful for her at the time. Perhaps remembering that state, a slight gloom cast over Charlotte's face.

I continued. "Currently, this land is managed by a pixie named Elyas who acts in the interests of the Blue Light. I hear that not all the monsters obey the pixie, but she seems to have quite a strong influence. Elyas has stated that she is willing to return Huzak to the humans immediately, but the countries in the south aren't able to make a move. They probably think that talking with her would be seen as a declaration of war with Dustour, since they are enemies with the Blue Light."

Elyas... Thinking about her last moments as they happened in the anime brought a pang of pain to my heart. In the future that would play out in Huzak, Elyas, who realized that a soldier of Dustour had been dispatched there, tried to secure a peace treaty with the humans in the south.

She thought about following in her younger sister Blue Light's footsteps: to make a group of monsters that could cooperate with humans in the south just like Blue Light did in the north. For her first step, she tried to get familiar with a noble of Daryth and a member of the royal family of Cirquista—Shuya and Alicia. However, they were attacked when she brought the two to White Castle, and...she died, just like that. All too soon.

"I think you were also surprised when you came here as a monster and saw it for yourself. It's the complete opposite of the rumored rule of the vampires. This peaceful world only exists probably because Elyas willed it so. She probably thought that if the humans wouldn't move, then she'd change this place into a world that was cozy for monsters to live in."

Unlike the southern part of the continent, people say that the history of the north was a history of war.

Humans would run away from strong monsters like dragons, but most everyday monsters were beings that were hunted by humans. Because of that, monsters lived in hiding, as if they were being constantly chased by predators. By sheer coincidence, they were able to gain land here where humans feared entering. To the monsters, Huzak was probably like a paradise.

I spun my next words carefully within my mind. "Charlotte, after this, I'm going to head into Tob Forest and gather information from within its depths. For that sake, I intend to act like a real orc. I think

that the monsters in this forest know the most about the man I want to learn about, so that's why I'm doing all this. Charlotte, seeing me take the side of monsters might make you feel uncomfortable, but... I'll apologize in advance. Sorry."

Charlotte had an unreadable look on her face. Perhaps she actually wanted to say all kinds of things to me, and there might have been some anger directed at me that was part of that look. Questions like, why have you been silent about the truth of my homeland for so long? Or, you still have things hidden from me, don't you?

"I understand," she said after a lengthy pause. "So, there's a reason why you specifically became an orc."

"Yes." I had a big reason why I transformed Charlotte into a pixie. And of course, there was one for why I chose to be an orc too. "I heard this from Marco. In this forest, orcs have banded into a large and powerful gr—"

I was about to explain my reasons to her, when...

We suddenly heard someone shouting in the distance, and we looked at each other with concern. Low, booming voices sounded out in unison with each other. At first, I thought they were humans, but once I listened to them carefully... They were completely different.

"Oiiiink! I'm going to die, oink!"

"I don't wanna die, oink! Someone, please save me, oink!"

They were definitely the voices of my comrades...no, I mean, the voices of *actual* orcs. I turned my head in the direction of the source. *Yep, there they are.* A group of orcs was being assaulted by a giant lizard walking on all fours.

That lizard-type monster was one of the most aggressive ones of its kind, the Attack Lizard. It had tough skin, was quite nimble for its size, and its long tongue could dart out quickly to seize enemies that were far from it. If we were going by the gauge of adventurers who challenged dungeon exploration, it was a monster categorized as B-rank, a relatively tough opponent.

"Master Slowe, that is..."

"Yeah. Speak of the devil."

Just as soon as we had started talking about orcs, we watched the group of them run away from the long, wriggling tongue of the Attack Lizard. This was a fight between monsters, and humans had nothing to do with it. However...

"I want to know what is happening right now in these lands, first and foremost, so I'm going to save them. Right now, I am an orc, and if my comrades are being attacked, I must go help."

Rooney, the Dustour soldier, was a strong opponent. Defeating him wouldn't be easy. After all, Shuya was only able to barely defeat him near the end of the anime after he was able to draw out the

power of Eldred. I wanted people who could fight alongside me, even if they were orcs.

At the very least, I wanted to force Rooney into a corner, like when a ridiculous number of monsters surrounded him in the anime. Thus, the most important thing to do first was to earn the recognition of the monsters in this country.

From the tall grass, I approached the group of orcs under the assault of the Attack Lizard. In my right hand, I tightly gripped my wand, which was odd for an orc, and...

“Oink oink oink!” I snorted loudly. *Time to sprint! The sprint that I often performed for the sake of my weight loss back in Kirsch!* I ran with my legs spread far apart, a large distance between each foot as they came down with loud thuds. *Get outta my way! A real orc is about to make his way down this path!*

“Gyuooh!!!” The lizard howled.

Whoa! Mister Lizard sure is loud! Up close, it's bigger than I thought! No matter how many orcs fight it, it probably wouldn't be enough! However, if I'm on the job...!

A squadron of orcs in a long line formation advanced through the forest in a stream. Among them was a certain orc who had boldly fought the Attack Lizard head-on.

The orc's body was battered with wounds all over, and this guy had been able to trade blow for blow against the Attack Lizard several times his size. For an orc, his moves in battle were pretty impressive. However, the moment I noticed the red tattoo on the left side of his chest during the battle, I knew why. There was no way a normal orc could fight on even footing with an Attack Lizard. Thus, that guy was definitely an Orc King.

I had approached the crowned orc, that same Orc King, and offered my assistance. Before he spoke up though, I took down the Attack Lizard with my spells. And then, well...there was a huge commotion about the appearance of an orc mage.

“Slobe, the great orc mage! My orc village welcomes you, oink!” The Orc King laughed heartily as he walked at the very front of the squadron. “I'm looking forward to seeing you there, Slobe. The orc village is booming, oiiink!”

I recognized this guy. He was Oinkus, the boss of the orc village where Shuya and Alicia stayed in the anime.

We had chanced upon each other while he was in the middle of bringing orcs from other villages to his own. Apparently, they had been running away from the giant Attack Lizard that had been driven out of Oinkus's village due to how rowdy it was.

“So, Oinkus... Is it true that an important pixie is going to visit your village soon?” I asked.

“It is, oink!”

I wanted to meet Elyas and form an amicable relationship with her, so heading to the orc village with him was the obvious path for me to take.

Charlotte walked along behind me in her pixie form. She seemed very curious about Elyas, the monster who currently ruled Huzak. The girl cradled the Great Spirit of Wind in her arms, who snored as they slept. The spirit had returned to us from who-knows-where. *They really just do whatever they want, huh? Is that really okay, Great Spirit? Show a little vigilance, at least!*

“That aside, Slobe.” Oinkus addressed me. “It is rare to see a pair of an orc and a pixie together. Are you two a couple or something, oink?”

Ever since I had used *Heal* on Oinkus to heal his wounds from the Attack Lizard, he had been determined to bring me, an orc mage, to his village. At first, I was worried that my cover might be blown since I wasn't a real orc, but it looks like I had been worried for nothing.

Still, please stop, Oinkus! Charlotte and I are currently doing a very delicate balancing act to maintain our fragile relationship. Can't you sense the awkward air between us? Well, I guess it's unfair of me to demand this from a monster who doesn't know our circumstances...

“Oh, we're just friends,” I said instead.

“I've never heard of pixies and orcs being friendly with each other, oink.”

I hesitated. “Stranger things have happened.”

This orc is really friendly and wants to get all chummy, huh... Talking about my relationship with Charlotte, though? The orc has poked quite a complex topic.

Are she and I friends? Retainer and master? Ah, but Charlotte's a princess. Could... Could we call ourselves friends? I don't know! I looked over to Charlotte with a plea for help in my eyes, but... Oh, she didn't notice. Wait, she's actually super stiff right now! I guess she must be uncomfortable since we're surrounded by monsters. But the orcs have also been talking to me the whole while, and...

“And why are you two wearing human clothes, oink?”

“Even as monsters, we need to stay fashionable. Otherwise, we'd fall behind the times!” I rambled out an excuse.

“Even so, I think it's weird for a pixie to wear something like that, oink!”

“Oh, I completely agree with...that...” I trailed off as I felt a pair of eyes drilling holes into my back. “Ah, I'm joking. I'm joking, I swear!”

I peeked behind me. Charlotte glared at me with eyes filled with an emotion darker than the murkiest sewers. Just moments ago, she had followed me nervously while swishing her head around to take in

her surroundings. *She really has a grudge against me about her clothes, doesn't she?*

Meanwhile, the column of orcs behind us sang together in a big chorus. "Orc mage, maaage!" *Wha— Hey! A few dozen orcs are lifting and carrying the Attack Lizard with us. Is it on the menu for dinner tonight or something?*

"Just wondering, Oinkus, why are you gathering monsters other than orcs in your village?" I asked.

"Oink. Do you know about the 'demon,' Slobe?"

I went quiet.

Oinkus took notice of my silence. "Huh? Slobe, why did you suddenly stop talking, oink?"

"Nah, it's nothing. A demon, huh... Could you tell me more about them?"

"It's a human who suddenly came to this country. This human steals the light. If you approach them, you won't be able to see a thing. To fight that guy, we must overcome the barriers of race and come together as one, oink."

Hearing that, I went quiet once again. *This human that the orcs are wary of... It's definitely Rooney. I guess the monsters have already noticed his presence at this point in time.*

Calling that guy a demon, though... Considering his spells, it's a rather accurate title. So the orcs are gathering monsters in their village to make a stand against the demon, and they say that they are fighting to drive him out one day. I suppose if you got a title as high as the king, you'd be pretty shrewd even if you're an orc, huh?

"Slobe is a mage. An orc mage, oink!" The orcs continued to sing in unison.

I listened to their terrible song as we walked. The orcs all snorted as they chanted "Slobe" and made a fuss about it. *Looks like the orcs have decided that's my name, huh?* Whenever I heard them call my name with their strange accents, I stifled a laugh.

Something had been bothering me this whole time. I hardened my resolve and asked the Orc King a question. "Hey Oinkus, I've been wondering about this for a while, but why is everyone wearing those weird decorations?" Including Oinkus, who wore a crown, the orcs decorated themselves with various accessories. To my knowledge, monsters wouldn't typically do such a meaningless thing.

"Oink! You have a keen eye, Slobe! This is—" Oinkus began.

A dignified female voice rang out, finishing his sentence. "For the sake of differentiating from each other."

Those were definitely the words of someone with keener intelligence, a contrast to the slowpoke orcs.

The voice continued. "They've managed to gain a peaceful life

here for a short while, so these guys started to play around.”

I turned around to find that Charlotte was also looking around restlessly for the source of the voice.

Something patted me on the shoulder twice. I looked to my side. Oinkus, the Orc King who wore a makeshift, handmade crown, pointed to the sky with his left hand. The sky was only a blue canvas layered with white clouds, and nothing more. *Is there someone there?* I cocked my head up, following Oinkus’s gesture.

“I’ve heard all about you. You’re the one who can use magic despite being an orc, aren’t you?” the woman said.

“Huh. So *you* came to *me*, and not the other way around,” I muttered.

She had beautiful wings coming out of her back. Her species loved playing pranks and were odd among monsters for they were born with mana in their bodies. It was said that her kind was only born in the Briar Forest, a place located in the north part of the continent and shrouded in a deep fog. They were sometimes referred to as Flower Fairies as they always wore a beautiful flower somewhere on their bodies.

“Do you need me to introduce myself?” she asked.

Ah... I couldn’t help but feel that this was fate. Always beautiful in an ethereal way and captivating... Someone who acted for the future of the pitiful monsters of the north more than anyone else...

The kind fairy who ruled this country despite being a powerless pixie.

“Slobe! She is—” Oinkus began.

I hesitated for a moment before cutting him off. “I know, Oinkus.”

“Whaaat?! You’re so knowledgeable, Slobe! Just like I thought, you’re a very smart orc, oink!”

“Step aside, Oinkus,” the pixie ordered. “There’s something I’d like to ask that orc.”

“Lady Elyas! This guy is Slobe, an orc mage, oink!” Oinkus exclaimed.

I knew the woman who was currently making a slow descent from the sky. My mind flashed back to that exact moment when she sacrificed her life to save Shuya and Alicia at White Castle. Her eyes pierced me, as sharp as needles. I met her gaze head-on.

And just like that...I was able to come face-to-face with *her*, the pixie who was fated to die all too soon.

Oinkus introduced her. “Slobe! This is Lady Elyas, the current ruler of this country, oink!”

A cute pixie with a crown of white flowers on her head slowly came down from the sky. With light blonde hair and a slightly harsh glint in her eyes, she flapped her wings as she descended. She reminded me of your typical serious class president character from an anime. But even though her face was quite dignified... *No matter how you look at her, she looks like an older human lady cosplaying as the pixie class president!*

But no, forget that, she's the head pixie in charge with light blonde hair, Elyas.



Pixies, also called the fairies of the forest, had pure and innocent-looking faces. However, they also wore clothes that toed the line between sweet and scandalous. *I don't know whether that's the direct reason for it, but pixies are so popular among monster otakus that they've been crowned as one of the two unmatched species, alongside succubi!*

Elyas stared at Oinkus with incredulous eyes. Behind me, Charlotte looked up at Elyas with curiosity written all over her face.

"The Orc King over there doesn't know how to shut up once he starts, so I'll ignore him..." Elyas mumbled to herself before continuing. "Going back to what I said earlier, there's an increasing number of individualistic orcs in the village where these guys live, thanks to the appearance of an odd Orc King interested in human culture. There are even some that try to show their unique character by only wearing a sock on one foot."

"The Sole-Sock-Orc trend is the epitome of fashion that Oioioinkus cooked up! By the way, I, Oinkus, have a crown because I'm an Orc King! I'm an almighty king, ya know! Ah, that aside, Lady Elyas! Slobe over here was able to take out a giant lizard with a super strong spell earlier, oink!"

The pixie, who finally touched the ground, turned and faced me. "That's what I want to talk about. Slobe, was it? What in the world is that about? I've never heard of an orc that can use magic."

Pixies were generally quite short, and she was about average height for her race, so she was shorter than my orc self. *Still, I really shouldn't have expected less from a pixie. Her face is unbelievably beautiful and refined, and she even smells nice. I want to try petting her...*

"There are a few things I'd like to ask. First off, where did you get that wand from?" she asked.

"I inherited this from my father, Oi Oin," I said.

Elyas's eyebrow twitched a few times, and she placed a hand to her temple. "One thing I will never understand is how you orcs come up with names... Um, so then, why did you two come to this country?"

I gave her a brief explanation. I said that the number of adventurers had increased in Daryth, making life difficult for us. We heard rumors that if we came to Huzak, a strong monster from the north would protect us. Then...I told her that we also came to take a look at White Castle, which was famous for its beauty.

Elyas had been nodding along as I spoke. However, the moment White Castle came up, her attitude shifted. "Don't go near that place. A weird human has shown up and everyone is extremely unsettled. You would probably be killed for just approaching that area. Even I wouldn't go near there without a plan."

I see, so it really is the same as in the anime. Elyas's influence doesn't

reach White Castle. However, I knew that Elyas was trying to form an alliance with the monsters in that area in order to fight Rooney.

As for Rooney, he saw White Castle as a foothold for uniting the continent. He started fierce battles with adventurers in the vicinity, and once he ran out of humans, he set his sights on the monsters living in and around the castle itself.

Oinkus spoke up. "Lady Elyas, I disagree with making those guys our allies, oink."

"Beggars can't be choosers in this situation, Oinkus. Though we have the upper hand in numbers, they have quality on their side. If those monsters agree to be our allies willingly, then even that human would..." Elyas trailed off, turning to me. "So, Slobe. Since you're with Oinkus, I assume you're heading to the orc village?"

"Yes, Lady Elyas! Slobe is going to become one of us in our village, oink!"

"That's reassuring... Also, I've been curious for a while, but the monster over there is a pixie, right?" Elyas asked.

"Lady Elyas! Apparently, li'l Charlotte and Slobe are a couple! So yeah, that's how it is, oink!"

"...Huh?" Elyas, who had been glancing Charlotte's way with curiosity during the conversation, was floored at Oinkus's words. She bent backward with a snap. She was so shocked that if we were in a manga, she would have a giant "freeze" sound effect plastered all over her.

"I-Is that true?!" Elyas exclaimed.

Charlotte seemed to answer on reflex. "Y-Yes?"

Elyas stood in front of Charlotte and rattled on without a care. "Are you *serious*? What's so good about an *orc*? Why are you wearing clothes even though you're a pixie? He's an orc. An *orc*, you know?!"

Uh... What a harsh reaction. Even if I'm not actually an orc, I'm a little offended!

"Let's have a heart-to-heart later, Charlotte. It's also my job to listen to the stories of girls who ran away from home," Elyas finished.

Pixies, who were also called fairies of the forest, had various tales associated with their race due to how cute they were. One of them was the title of a matchmaking Cupid. When she later interrogated Charlotte, Elyas didn't show a single ounce of the dignity befitting Huzak's boss. The woman in charge was nothing other than a grinning fairy who greedily gobbled up gossip about love.

"Slobe! This is my village, oink!"

Shabbily thrown together wooden fences surrounded the orc village. On one side of the village was a grassy plain, and the other exit of the village probably led to a forest. From even outside the

fence, I could spot the disorderly gate that had strange, giant bones and feathers on display.

They had probably tried to restore a village that humans had abandoned and expanded it by cutting down trees. Square houses built with layered stones littered the entirety of the village, and orcs ran around the place snorting and chatting noisily. There were many orcs here doing various activities. Some were marching along steadily while carrying lumber. Others were cooking. Orc children were running around. You could really feel the lively, chaotic spirit of this village.

Oh, that's... I noticed that the orcs were carrying the giant lizard I had defeated earlier into the depths of the village while snorting and panting in unison.

“Slobe! In my orc village, we even have specialist cooks, oink!” Oinkus declared proudly.

“Charlotte... Of course it was your own choice to run away from home in the Briar Forest, but for you to come all the way to the south... How did you do it? Did anything scary happen to you on the way? Are you okay?” Elyas asked.

It was a little surreal to see orcs opening doors and making their way in and out of their homes since they were usually thought of as foolish and clumsy. *Oh. That door broke. Orcs are so strong, it's probably hard for them to control their strength. I guess they can't help it.*

Still, seeing a village where monsters lived was a first for me. Charlotte seemed to share the same sentiment as she also looked around the village with fascination in her eyes.

“I’ll gift you a house too, Slobe! Would you prefer to live together with li’l Charlotte, oink?”

Elyas continued her own conversation. “Charlotte, listen carefully. I wouldn’t say that all humans are our enemies. However, once upon a time, pixies were used to put on shows for humans and we really suffered. Surely you know that too! Wait...Charlotte, are you serious about living with an *orc*?! Are you really fine with that, as a pixie?!”

All right. I admit it. My heart is overcome with exhilaration right now. This place was where Shuya and Alicia had stayed in the anime, and now *I* was here too. Though we were a little early, this meant that we would fulfill the roles they had in Huzak in the anime’s timeline.

“Poiink... A weird cat is chasing me, poiink...”

I heaved a sigh internally, the magic of the moment broken by Charlotte’s “pet.” *I’m having a moment here... The Great Spirit took no time to start playing with the orc children and chasing them. I swear, nothing can chain that spirit down...*

Since there were so many orcs here, I had thought that Charlotte might struggle to tell me apart if I didn’t have something to identify

me. However, as Elyas said, the orcs in this village were all unique in their own ways. There was an orc that only had a sock on one foot, another orc that had a leaf on their head, an orc that was trying to look cool by holding a twig in their mouth... Did that last one think he was in an old samurai drama or something?

“Slobe! Currently, our village is under an unprecedented threat. The humans that the demon faced are all gone now, and... Well, lately, the demon has started killing monsters for fun, oink. We fear that it’ll be our turn now that the humans are done with, and that he might come to this village as well...”

“Okay, Charlotte. Like what Oinkus just said, there’s a very dangerous human in this country, just like the rest. This human isn’t a soldier from Daryth or Cirquista, nor are they an adventurer. *Those* humans aren’t a threat to pixies like us at all. A small threat is enough to scare away humans creating havoc in Huzak, but the human we’re talking about this time is different, Charlotte.”

In the past, Huzak used to be a haven for adventurers lacking in morals—a place where they could do anything they wished. Elyas said that they had the most trouble with adventurers from Zenelaus, the Dungeon City. Yet somehow they deemed that this man was more dangerous than those adventurers.

This man was the enemy I must defeat.

“I-It’s not like I’m trying to frighten you or anything!” Elyas stammered. “It’s just that...pixies are already targeted by adventurers since we fetch good money, so... It’s always safer to be overly cautious rather than underprepared.”

Charlotte listened attentively to Elyas, who was a family member of the famous Blue Light. Oddly enough, it seemed that Elyas was the only one she wasn’t scared of.

I sniffed, getting a whiff of a delicious smell. For some reason, the pleasant fragrance of grilling meat was in the air. “Hey, Oinkus,” I muttered. “Don’t tell me, this smell is...”

Up until a little while ago, I had been the blackhearted Piggy Duke who had done whatever I wanted. Even if I might not have looked like myself anymore, my accumulated experience and skills hadn’t gone away. In other words, I was still *extreemely* sensitive to the smell of food!

I took a gulp from a misshapen wooden mug filled to the brim with water, then chomped down on the meat. “Yum! This is so good!!!”

There was an area in the village with wooden tables and chairs that looked like an outdoor classroom, and apparently, it was where the orcs dined.

Here, there was a feast of hot, steaming food. Meat and wild plants were generously piled into wooden bowls. Charlotte nodded with admiration at the meal. Considering that she didn't comment on anything, the wild plants were edible as well. Right now, the meat in my mouth belonged to the Attack Lizard I had taken down earlier. *Aaah... Food is the best!* I felt energy permeate my entire body and all my organs, giving me vitality.

"We want to eat too, oink... Unfair, oink," an orc complained.

"S it really fine for him to drink tha' much water? It's precious, oink!" another orc chimed in to complain.

It apparently wasn't supposed to be mealtime yet and other orcs stared at us enviously. However, the tale of me being an orc mage had spread like wildfire across the village, along with the rumor that I had been the one to take down the giant lizard. Thanks to that, the other orcs seemed placated and figured it was okay. *Orcs really are simpleminded, aren't they?*

"Oinkus, is water a precious resource here?" I asked.

"Lately, a huge snake started living in the lake where we usually get our water. Since then, the water has only gotten dirtier and dirtier, so we've started going to faraway ponds to get more. But Slobe, you don't have to worry about those old men, oink."

Huh, I see. Seems like the monsters of this village are troubled. For the sake of gathering intel, I wanted to get their trust as soon as possible, so I guess I'd give them a hand here. But that wasn't all. Personally, water was a matter of life and death to me as well. Thus, I stuffed down all my lunch without stopping and stood up.

"Oinkus, bring me to that lake you mentioned."



I came to this land by forcing my way here despite my sister's objections. My younger sister has a silly title like "Demon King" in the north. I wanted to prove that a normal pixie, even without great power, could also create a peaceful world for monsters. How many years has it been since then, I wonder? Elyas thought.

"Even that Eagle Eye guy wasn't able to do anything, oink. There's no way that the orc mage could deal with it," an orc muttered.

"In the end, Lady Elyas was useless, oink," another said.

I thought that such a day would come eventually. A monster I couldn't handle would appear, and my powerlessness will be forced out into the open. I am helpless, unlike my sister in the north. I'm just a normal pixie who's only a little good at controlling the wind. The moment someone looks down on me, even once...I'm done for.

"Hey, don't say that! Lady Elyas is sad, oink."

"He's not wrong. Like I thought, Lady Elyas is different from the

great Demon Lord. If the Demon Lord were here, she'd take care of it in seconds, oink."

The hydra that had decided to take up residence in the depths of the lake had been a thorn in Elyas's side for a long time. She wanted to come up with a remarkable solution and be recognized as the leader of Huzak. Such thoughts were certainly a part of it, but there was also a more important reason. If the water supply issue was fixed, monsters could move and settle in the orc village at a faster rate. She wanted to gather as many monsters as she could in the village to prepare for the inevitable standoff with the demon.

The problem was that the hydra only appeared on the surface once every few days. Even if she wanted to hunt it down, she didn't have any way to attack it while it was underwater, so she was struggling with how to deal with it.

However, the boy... The orc mage confidently declared to leave matters to him, as if it were no big deal. She couldn't rule it out as big talk; he had already managed to easily defeat a monster that even the Orc King had trouble with.

As for the orc mage, a vast and boundless lake lay before him right now.

Elyas hesitated before she spoke up. "Slobe, what are you planning on doing?"

"In for a penny, in for a pound,' as they say," he said. "Everyone, please stand back."

Obedying his request, Elyas and the orcs stepped away. Seeing that, the orc mage simply waved his wand, and that was all.

However, Elyas's instincts told her that the enormous hydra in the water was *mad*. "Slobe! What did you—"

"Look, it's coming out!"

Several pillars of water rose from the lake's surface all at once. Elyas manifested a wind barrier to protect the crowd. She realized that this was an attack from the hydra hidden in the depths of the lake. *Likely, the orc mage Slobe did something to it underwater... Something that was off-putting to the hydra, and he incurred its wrath.*

The great coiled hydra lifted its head out of the water. *But my bodyguard Eagle Eye isn't here...* Elyas saw a tragic future waiting for her.

The next moment didn't betray her expectations. Water with a will of its own cut through the air, flying down towards everyone standing near the lake's bank: the orcs, Elyas, and the orc mage himself.

Nobody could move...except the orc mage, who only put away his wand as if he had finished his job. Then, Elyas felt a chill in the air.

She stared at the scene before her.

The lake was freezing over. The water turned into ice at an unbelievably fast rate, and the future Elyas predicted could no longer happen. Instead, a giant ice sculpture of a hydra was born...and her eyes met with those of the orc mage.



As many orcs let out screams of exhilaration, he spoke to Elyas. "You're gonna pick a fight with the demon. If you're having trouble against a mere hydra, you won't be able to do anything against him."

Elyas was shocked to her core. "Slobe, just... Just who *are* you...?"

In the brief moment when the orc mage passed her by, he whispered in a voice so low that only she could hear his next words. "You see, Elyas... I'm an orc mage who came to defeat that demon."

And this was how the two met. She, a certain pixie who was given special treatment as the sister of the Demon King of the North, the Blue Light. And he, an extraordinarily unusual orc mage.



Even when I shut my door, I could still hear the sounds of horseplay filtering into the house. *Those guys... Just how long are they planning on continuing with the feast to celebrate defeating the hydra? I'm at my limit, ya know!*

Being the savior who solved the village's water supply issue, I had been placed at the heart of the feast. For the whole time, I had been forced to watch the orcs' party tricks and listen to their awful songs. I had only just been released from what seemed like an endless bash!

"I'm back, Charlotte..." I muttered.

"Welcome back, Master Slowe. They gave you a huge, warm welcome," Charlotte commented.

"Welcomed... Was I really? They were just making a big fuss the whole time, so I couldn't tell. Still, isn't this village way too dark at night? I doubt that they were even able to make out my face."

"The orcs..." Charlotte trailed off. "It seems that they are really scared of the person they're calling a demon. Is that demon the person who attacked Marco, though?"

"Most likely. Wait, thinking about it... Even if they aren't using fire, I think they'd end up provoking him if they made such an uproar."

Apparently, the orcs in this village refrained from using fire as much as they could at night so that they wouldn't attract the attention of the demon visiting Huzak. The orcs were terrified of this lone human. Just being with them for one day was enough for me to tell.

According to Elyas, her subordinate was off monitoring the demon's every move. He was far away at the moment, so there was no risk of an attack, or so she had said.

"Well, today, the demon isn't around and their drinking water supply problem was solved, so they're probably partying as hard as they can. They gave us a decent house too. Gotta thank them for that."

"I'm really glad they did," Charlotte said at length. "I braced

myself for sleeping out in the open in Huzak as a worst-case scenario.”

The house provided to us was a shabby one near the outskirts of the village. From the looks of it, since Charlotte had been released from the feast earlier than I was, she had cleaned up the place.

“More importantly, Charlotte, Elyas seemed to cling to you the whole time. What did you two talk about?”

“Well... I think Miss Elyas assumed that I’m a pixie that ran away from home, and it was *really* tricky for me to go along with that story.”

Just like how the orcs wouldn’t let me go, Elyas had stuck to Charlotte’s side like glue the whole day. Elyas made the reasonable but wrong assumption that Charlotte had run away from her family in the northern Briar Forest, where pixies lived, to the south, and she looked really worried about Charlotte. From what I heard from my retainer, Elyas had interrogated her for every little detail about what kind of life Charlotte led up until now.

“So what about White Castle?” I asked.

“Miss Elyas said that the castle is occupied by the strongest monsters in Huzak and that even *she* couldn’t get close...”

The castle Charlotte used to live in was the heart of Huzak, a structure that stood quietly in the forest. That general area was currently a den for particularly territorial monsters, so Elyas’s help was absolutely necessary if we wanted to get near the place.

Elyas was currently trying to make an alliance with the monsters of White Castle to fight against the demon. If we followed her when she went to negotiate, we could probably approach the castle rather easily.

“Now that I know being by Miss Elyas’s side means I have a chance to go... I think I have the motivation to try my best. A question for you, now, Master Slowe. Did you manage to ask about detailed information for your task?”

“I asked the orcs during the feast. They said that recently, there’s been a crazy human massacring Huzak’s monsters. That man is probably the guy who destroyed Marco’s squad. From what I heard, he’s far from normal.”

“Miss Elyas said that because he’s dangerous, her winged bodyguard is constantly monitoring him from the skies. I wonder what they mean when they say he steals light, though...”

“It’s probably a darkness spell. That aside, Charlotte, it looks like you aren’t scared of Elyas?”

“It’s because this isn’t the time for me to be scared! I need to hurry up and return to White Castle, and there are a lot of things I want to look for... Ah, that’s right. Miss Elyas mentioned that starting tomorrow, she’s heading off to settlements near this village. Since she

needs everyone's help to fight the demon, she's going around and calling for people to gather here."

"That reminds me. Oinkus, the Orc King, mentioned something along those lines too. Coming together to take down the demon or something."

"About that... Um... Miss Elyas said that she's going to teach me lots of stuff, so I think I'm going to go with her starting tomorrow. The Great Spirit will be with me, but I'll try my best to be careful."

"If you want to go to White Castle safely, you need to gain Elyas's trust. I think it's for the best."

By their nature, pixies weren't monsters that excelled at combat. As a result, Elyas always had a few strong monsters by her side as bodyguards, and the monsters in Huzak greatly respected such a pixie. The fact that Elyas stopped by this orc village often was probably one of the big reasons why so many monsters decided to settle here.

Huh, you know, I'm able to talk a lot more easily to Charlotte now than I thought. Maybe...she isn't angry anymore, perhaps? "Charlotte... Uh, about the fact that I kept my silence about your secret for so long..."

However, it seemed that at that moment, my luck ran out.

"Master Slowe, right now, I can only think about returning to White Castle and nothing else... It feels like I'm deceiving Miss Elyas with this form so I feel a little guilty, but I don't know how long we can stay here, so..."

I went silent for a moment. "Sorry, you're right. That isn't something I should bring up now."

I'm here to defeat Rooney and change the future. This takes priority over everything else in my eyes right now. Of course, Charlotte also came to Huzak for her own reasons. Compared to how important her homeland is to her, our relationship issues are like a fly you can simply swat away. No, they're more like a bug you ignore altogether!

"I also have something I must achieve here. Our time in Huzak is short, so let's both do our best to accomplish our respective g—"

I was cut off by the shouting of an orc outside. "Let's party all the way into the morning today, oink!"

"Oink! Hell yeah, it's the arrival of Age of the Orcs!"

"Those guys outside need to learn how to shut up..." I grumbled. *Jeez... These orcs really know how to ruin a moment, don't they?*

Even if they snorted while claiming that they didn't use fire so as to not provoke the demon, making this much noise totally defeated the purpose! However, they seemed to be having fun, so I left them be.

Not only that...but right now, their silly ruckus was something I was thankful for, at the very least.

When I left my house the next morning, I found a pile of unmoving orc corpses on the ground. Well, they had collapsed, but they weren't *actually* dead. It seemed that they had all passed out under the influence of alcohol.

Even though other monsters also joined the feast, most of the half-dead bodies on the ground were orcs. They snored loudly as they slept.

Welp, that's the excitable nature of orcs for you. These guys... I wonder how they'd react if they found out that I'm a human. They might be surprisingly unaffected by... No, that's not possible. Even orcs wouldn't be that carefree...

I walked through the village, careful not to step on any of the orc corpses. "Oops, that was a close one."

Everything had gone without a hitch yesterday. I honestly hadn't thought that I would be able to come to the orc village during my first day in Huzak.

This was where Shuya and Alicia stayed in the anime. Once I had that thought in mind, the fact that I had actually come to a foreign world felt so *real*.

"Slobe, you're up early. Is Charlotte still at home?"

The monster who talked to me was from a race hunted down wildly by humans as exhibits to please the eyes due to their ethereal beauty: a pixie. Because of that, there were practically no sightings of them in the south nowadays.

She came at the perfect time. There was a lot I wanted to talk about with Elyas, but yesterday, she only had eyes for her kin, Charlotte, so I had refrained.

"Yeah, she's still asleep," I answered.

"I see. She mentioned that it's the first time she's in a place with so many monsters, so she's probably tired from the feast yesterday."

Elyas's guess was likely right on the mark. In the first place, Charlotte didn't have positive emotions towards monsters. There's no way she could. Monsters were the ones who had destroyed her homeland, after all.

However, in the case of Elyas... Between her absolutely adorable pixie looks and the fact that Charlotte needed to get chummy with her to go to White Castle, Charlotte had taken the initiative to be friendly.

"Right... She might be tired. I mean, I know you can't excuse her completely just because of that, but if Charlotte acts weird when an orc talks to her, please forgive her."

Elyas giggled. "Acting weird, you say?"

How would Charlotte react to this large group of monsters when she wakes up this morning? Though she had implied that she wasn't

affected last night, another day had passed and reality must be sinking in. I didn't know what she would think. In my opinion, this morning was going to be a critical moment for her.

"From what I saw from you yesterday, Slobe... Even though you're an orc, you don't really get carried away easily, do you?"

"You think so?"

"Orcs are monsters who only live in the moment and do whatever comes to their mind, aren't they? However, you left halfway during the feast last night. It was rather rare."

Well, I'm a human, so yeah.

She continued. "Hey, there's something I wanted to ask about Charlotte. May I?"

I hesitated. "Sure."

"Slobe, where did you meet her? She said that you two met in Daryth, but that's impossible. A pixie surviving for many years without being found by humans in the south... I can't even imagine it."

Pixies were very popular monsters due to their adorable faces. Even when she was deep in thought, there was something endearing about her. Watching her, I couldn't help a smile crawling onto my face. I knew that Elyas wasn't doing it on purpose, but I knew I wouldn't be able to turn down her requests if she made any.

It was also probably because I had a really good impression of her actions in the anime... Thus, I really hoped that a future where Elyas met such a tragic end would never come to pass.

"Slobe, what I'm trying to say is... As long as she's here, I want to take care of her as much as I can."

Yesterday, Charlotte had told me that she would follow Elyas around. I didn't have any objections to that. *However, I'll ask her this just in case.* "Why is that?"

"The biggest reason is that we're of the same race. That's not all, though... She said that she can't fly, right? And she can't use wind magic either. A pixie like her would usually be deemed hopeless and be thrown away immediately. That's why it's the first time I've seen one who has grown up as much as she has."

Well, I mean, Charlotte's a human too, that's why. I groaned inwardly with guilt. *I feel awful since it feels like I'm deceiving her, but...so far, even Elyas, who has a good intuition, doesn't seem to suspect Charlotte is a human at all.*

Elyas continued. "So, thank you. I give you my gratitude as a fellow pixie."

"You're thanking me? Why?"

"I've never heard of an orc and a pixie as a couple, but...it seems that she's quite attached to you, Slobe. She probably led a happy life

since she was able to be with...you... Ah, Charlotte!”

Charlotte walked out of the house while rubbing her eyes. She seemed pretty shocked when she saw the orcs half-dead from the wine, but she walked around them nimbly to approach us. In her arms, she hugged the Great Spirit of Wind, who also seemed half-conscious. *Looks like I was worried for nothing.*

I heard Oinkus’s voice. “Slobe, come over for a sec! I’m going to introduce you to everyone that wasn’t there for your introduction yesterday. First, let’s go to Golm the golem’s place, oink!”

“Looks like Oinkus is calling for me. So then, Elyas, please take care of Charlotte,” I said.

“Leave it to me.” Elyas gave a short answer as she softened her expression.

And Elyas, who didn’t know anything about her original future from the anime, kicked the ground to take off like the pixie she was, floated slightly, and finally landed in front of Charlotte’s eyes.

Right now, Elyas and Oinkus were both using their connections to try and draw monsters of different races to the village. When I had first met Oinkus, he had mentioned that the orc village was developing at an extraordinary rate, and I certainly saw that to be true.

“Unless we all come together as one, we can’t win against the demon! We even have an orc mage—the same mage who was able to take down the infamous hydra, oink! ...All right, successful introduction! Now, let’s go to the next one, Slobe!”

However, even from what my general knowledge told me, I had never even heard of monsters from different races gathering and living in one place. It was probably a sign of how far the fear of the demon had spread among the monsters lurking in Huzak. They all knew that if the man ever set his sights on them, they couldn’t fight back with just their own power.

“Hey there! Go back to the lake where you used to be, oink!”

“Oinkus, why are you talking to the pond?” I asked.

“There is an undine, a water nymph, in here. However, since the hydra had stolen its residence, it moved here, oink.”

“Ah, I see. If you want the undine to come out, you have to say something special. Let’s see...”

Races with different lifestyles and cultures were all gathered in the orc village. Thus, fights were bound to break out very often, but monsters like Oinkus would cut in and try to mediate the quarrel.

As for me, being out and about every day meant that I came

across many interesting situations. For example, I saved a golem drowning in the river with a wind spell, and then I saved a slime that sunbathed for too long and nearly dried up with a water spell.

Whenever this type of thing happened, it reminded me of being at Kirsch, solving the troubles of the people there with my magic. Using spells to heal rough hands, fixing a broken magic sculpture... Back then, Charlotte and I had worked very hard as a pair to fix my terrible reputation.

“Whoa, awesome! The hermit undine really came out, oink!”

“Oinkus, to tell the truth, my knowledge isn’t just average at all,” I said smugly.

Hmm... I wonder what everyone in Daryth is doing. Are there students helping out with the reconstruction of the campus? I heard that they pay pretty well, and earth mages would be especially helpful for construction... Ah, people like Tina might be helping out.

Apparently, Professor Loco Moco’s one of the people in charge of reconstruction plans, so he’s probably busy every single day. Valjean’s probably at home. At the end of the day, I know he cherishes his family a lot. However... Yeah, those two are the ones I’m the most curious about.

“Theeere you are, the rumored orc mage! Please cast a *Heal* on me, guoooh!” A monster howled in my direction.

“The orc mage is super famous! A lot of monsters just piled in here and are asking to be healed, oink!” Oinkus yelled.

I was appalled. “What? Wait, where in the world did *that* rumor come from?”

But of course, I’m curious about Shuya and Alicia. In the anime, the two made use of the long holidays to go to the Dungeon City Zenelaus in the Freedom Union. Shuya quietly made a plan to cut across Huzak as a shortcut, and he actually managed to go through with his plan.

However, now that I had come to this place, I knew one thing for sure: Huzak was currently too dangerous. *Shuya, don’t come here. I beg you, don’t come here. Forcing your way through Huzak to Zenelaus... Anyone who tries that must have a death wish!*

“Orc King, that demon destroyed the kobold clan from what I hear, oink! The survivors are requesting entrance into this orc village, oink!” an orc reported.

“We’ve always argued with each other, but we should all help each other in times of need. Let’s take them in. Okay, let’s make new houses. Call the golems here, oink!” Oinkus ordered.

Wow, there’s no sign of the influx of monsters stopping at all. Most of the monsters are taking a liking to the village and deciding to settle here too.

The flow of time felt slow in the orc village, and the monsters here were gentle and calm. For those that had survived the harsh north, this place was probably like a paradise with few outside enemies, but... *Something's still off. The monsters that are gathered in this village are obviously way more numerous than in the anime! I mean, it's helpful that so many monsters are gathered in this village. I definitely don't wanna fight a strong guy like Rooney one-on-one.*

At the very least, I want there to be a lot of monsters around so they could pressure him, so I suppose this is working in my favor, but hmm...

“Hey, Oinkus,” I called out. “We’ve already done enough for today. Isn’t it about time to head back?”

“Not yet! We’ll go all the way to the finish today, oink!”

At this rate, we’ll probably get back late at night again. I heaved a sigh inwardly. *Looks like I won’t have any time to talk to Charlotte today either.*

Elyas had kept true to her word and brought Charlotte to all kinds of places, so it was common for Charlotte and me to only see each other again late at night.

Speaking of Elyas, the ruler of Huzak... She had requested permission to be the one in charge of Huzak from her little sister, the Demon King of the North. Though she had faced objections from her sister, she was stubborn and had come to this country anyway. The Blue Light had given Elyas several robust monsters and asked that she at least bring them around as her bodyguards.

Right now, Elyas was making plans to gather all the monsters she could in the orc village. The Orc King protecting the village agreed with Elyas, so everything was going smoothly.

I paused. “Oinkus, I see something in the sky. Wait, is that...a griffin?”

“We call it Eagle Eye. It’s the monster who protects Lady Elyas, oink.”

Ah, I see. That’s the one who monitors the demon at all times, Eagle Eye. With a stern and seemingly hard-to-please face, the monster fixed its gaze in one spot from its position in the skies. *Is it able to monitor the demon’s every movement perfectly from up there or something? That can’t be. If it is, just how good are its eyes?!*

“Slobe, the Eagle Eye is very prideful, so I’d advise against talking to it, oink. A dragon ignored it, and then it tried to ambush the demon from the skies a while ago, but it got counterattacked. Ever since that happened, it has been on edge. Whenever it sees me talking with Lady Elyas, it gets mad at me, screeching that a lowly orc shouldn’t dare, oink...”

Oh, so it’s one of those who discriminate against orcs. That’s a trait

pretty common among strong monsters. The general impression of orcs is that they are excessively numerous but weak. It's pitiful, but you can't argue against the truth.

"Wait, it attacked the demon?" I asked. "If I remember right, hasn't Elyas temporarily banned attacks against him?"

"She has. But that guy definitely did it to try and look cool in front of Lady Elyas, oink."

"Oinkus..." I said slowly. "Did you tease that griffin?"

Oinkus didn't reply, and that was more than enough for me. "So you *did* tease them... Of course it'd be mad at you."

I see... Even a griffin doesn't stand a chance against Rooney, huh? I asked Oinkus for more details. Apparently, Eagle Eye, the griffin in the skies, hadn't even been able to get one hit in. *But it won't be a problem. I know how that soldier fights, and I also know what that guy would prioritize when driven into a corner.*

That's why...I need more of them. Gather in the orc village, monsters of Huzak. More and more of you, so that I can force him into a tight spot.



While such thoughts went through the boy's head...

Like every other day, the former princess of Huzak was exhausted yet again today, and she opened the door of their run-down house on the outskirts of the village. After she closed it behind her, she let out a sigh. Feeling relieved of her burdens, she collapsed onto the bed. Before her was the Great Spirit of Wind in a tiny body. Though they were assigned to be her bodyguard, they had never actually acted on their position a single time.

"Charlotte, you look tired again today, meow."

"Of course I am, in this kind of environment. I'm exhausted." Every single day, she was surrounded by so many orcs and had to spend her time with monsters. Her reaction was only natural.

Taking on the form of a monster herself, she had been able to return to her homeland of Huzak. Then, by a stroke of luck, she had been able to meet the monster that ruled over it, and she had been able to gain the information she wanted. The kind pixie gladly told Charlotte everything she wanted to know. Little by little, she was growing used to life here, and she was surprised by her own feelings.

"Great Spirit, have you grown used to being here yet?" she asked.

"It's fun. Chasing orc brats around is fun, meow."

Charlotte was silent for a moment before speaking up carefully. "You are too carefree."

Having been in Huzak for a short while now, she understood why Slowe had chosen to change her into a pixie. However, she hadn't been able to see him lately. She knew that he had been going around with the Orc King until late in the night to persuade stubborn monsters to join them. However, unlike her, he seemed to be having lots of fun since he transformed into an orc. *Even though he's a human, he's becoming friends with monsters. Doesn't he consider the possibility of what might happen when they find out?*

Charlotte sighed. "Great Spirit, please bring me to White Castle. If you would just help me a little, I wouldn't have to go through all this trouble..."

"Charlotte... There's no longer anyone left in White Castle, meow..."

Charlotte took a while before she could answer the spirit. "I know that."

"Then why? Why do you want to go there, meow?"

This pet of hers was always like this. They had been by her side for a long time, but they never lifted a paw to take action for her sake. The one who always faced Charlotte's foes for her was *him*. She knew

that. She *knew* that. After all, he was the person she was the most grateful to.

However, that was all the more reason why... *He could have just told me earlier about his secret!*

"I'm...keeping that a secret from you, Great Spirit!"

"So stingy, meow."

Charlotte lay on the bed and closed her eyes. It was her way of getting back at her friend, who had pretended they couldn't talk all this time.

Then, there was only silence left in the room.

That evening, Charlotte dreamed for the first time in a while.

She dreamed of the past—of happy times here in Huzak, much unlike the present where she could find neither hide nor hair of humans no matter where she walked.

Her father was there, as well as her mother, and she didn't have a care in the world. Unlike now, she had never wondered what happiness was back then, and she had never worried about having warm bedding and food.

She hadn't dreamed of her homeland for many years, and these dreams made her so nostalgic that it took her by surprise... Because she was able to remember those halcyon days for the first time in a long time, she couldn't help a smile from crawling onto her face.

After she had come back to Huzak, she once again was forced to face the reality that her homeland had disappeared. However, there was still one reason why she aimed to go to White Castle, despite it being void of people.

I want to tell him my honest feelings. Would he be happy if I gave that to him?



I returned to the orc village sometime after midnight. When I finally entered my house, I found Charlotte deep asleep as always, lying on her bed without making a sound.

Every day, an extremely anxious Charlotte spent time with Elyas and her bodyguard monsters. If anything were to happen to her, the Great Spirit of Wind by her side would probably protect her with everything they had.

Even then, being with monsters around the clock was probably suffocating. I'd had a similar experience myself today; my heart had skipped a beat as the monsters had started talking about a black dragon that had apparently gone around and razed these lands.

Perhaps because of that, whenever Charlotte came back home, she always immediately collapsed into bed and tried her best to recover

her stamina.

I stared at her quietly. *Despite all that, her sleeping face looks so peaceful. Just what kind of dream is she having? She's in a place where she can't relax, so I hope that she can have as happy of a dream as possible.*

I muttered to myself, "That reminds me... A little while ago, Elyas did say that Charlotte was very curious and inquisitive."

According to her, pixies were generally cowardly and didn't take initiative to interact with monsters from other races. Yet Charlotte was the one who began to talk to Elyas's bodyguards first, and she continued working in earnest to fit in. Elyas had smiled at that, saying that she shouldn't have expected anything less from a girl who had run away from home, but...

Why is Charlotte trying that hard? Is it because she wants to go to White Castle? That place is her home and where she grew up, I get that. Like her, I sometimes reminisce about my memories back in the Denning lands too... But right now, that place is nothing more than a ruin.

What in the world is driving Charlotte to go so far? On the night we came to this orc village, she said that there was something she wanted to find in White Castle, but...

"She probably wouldn't tell me," I mused. "From what I know, she even keeps it a secret from the Great Spirit."

We had left the capital and come to Huzak all by ourselves. I'd thought that we might be able to be together in the evenings at least, but it seemed that the only thing in Charlotte's head was going to White Castle...

If everything keeps going smoothly and Charlotte does get to go there, what will she do? Aim to restore Huzak, maybe? She is royalty. Maybe she has a noble aim that I can't even try to imagine? ...She probably does. At the end of the day, she is a princess, after all...

I fell silent.

Even the Great Spirit of Wind was dozing without a care in the world, making strange sounds as they snored.

I sighed and mumbled to myself. "Hear me out once in a while too, okay? Even *I* have things I worry about, ya know...?"

Haaah, I'm hungry. I suppose I'll ask Oinkus and grab something to munch on for now.

I took one step outside my house into a village overflowing with monsters sleeping on the bare ground without a cushion in sight. *Like I thought, monsters other than orcs have visibly increased compared to before. The reason behind that... Well, one thing probably plays a big part.*

"Slobe!" An orc came up to me along with several others. "Cast that glowing spell on this thing I picked up in the woods, oink!"

I enchanted the accessories the orcs brought to me with a light spell. Once I did that, the items started glowing faintly in reaction to

the darkness. *A light this faint probably wouldn't provoke that demon who's out there somewhere.*

"I'm tired today, so I'll leave the rest for tomorrow, 'kay?" I muttered.

Perhaps due to the influence of the demon who stole light, the fear of darkness was widespread in the orc village. The small light I provided had sent the monsters here over the moon. Seeing this dim light, even more monsters had started gathering here.

"It's a beautiful light, Slobe," Elyas said.

"Elyas," I said at length. "You're still awake? It's really late right now."

"Thanks for worrying about me. But what you want to ask about isn't me, it's about Charlotte, isn't it?"

I hesitated. "You can tell?"

"I'll have you know she's doing great. And that's the truth."

"I'm glad to hear that. But Elyas, I *am* also worried about your health, ya know."

Elyas giggled. "Thanks."

The orc village had obtained a few light sources now, and it had come to be overflowing with all kinds of monsters from all kinds of races. However, this pixie was definitely still special to me above everyone else. This kind woman was the ruler of Huzak, even though she didn't look the part at all.

Talking to Elyas was important. Asking about Charlotte's everyday life was important too, but... Right now, the best source of information about the demon lying in wait was Elyas.

"I've wanted to ask this for a while, but...are you quarreling with Charlotte at the moment?"

I stammered, "Wh-Wha—"

"Is it true? Are you two fighting? Am I asking something weird?"

"Wh...Why... May I ask why you think we are...?"

"I've almost never seen you two actually together, that's why. You also often come to me and ask about Charlotte, so I thought you two might not be talking much at home."

She's alllllways sleeping, that's why! And you keep bringing Charlotte all over the place and tiring her out! I wanted to shout that out loud, but I forced the urge down.

In the daytime, I had been spending my time near the orc village doing odd jobs and tackling problems that people approached me with.

The tension between Charlotte and me was still hanging overhead, unresolved. That was all because our schedules didn't overlap at all.

"Not only that, but you both feel distant from each other. It's as if

you're both trying to be considerate and end up being too reserved with the other one."

"It...It's not like it matters to you, Elyas," I stammered.

"Oh really? I wonder about that." Elyas seemed to be having the time of her life for some reason.

She didn't have her usual serious air about her, unlike when she acted regally as the ruler of this land. *Surely this is her natural self. Pixies are monsters that love gossip and rumors, after all.*

She continued. "Also, Slobe. What you said after you defeated the hydra at the lake... Were you serious?"

I paused. "Did I say something back then?"

"You declared to me that you'd defeat the demon. That man is a human whom even the Eagle Eye deemed undefeatable, you know that? Eagle Eye is a griffin that used to lead groups of monsters in the north. It belongs to a class of monster that normally wouldn't be assigned to be a mere bodyguard of mine. And that exact same Eagle Eye was the one who said that it's impossible to defeat the demon."

"Elyas, I'm serious about it."

"I think you're a very strong mage, but it's unreasonable. It's better to give up on that."

One single human was enough to thrust this many monsters into the darkest crevices of fear, and he was the "demon" that had appeared in Huzak. Everyone here lived with that anxiety. Apparently, their instincts as monsters told them that it was all for naught...and that it was impossible to win against that human.

I really, reeeally get where they're coming from. This was an event that Shuya was meant to lose in the anime, after all. Rooney was a character that an awakened Shuya was meant to defeat, but not anytime before that happened.

"I want you to keep this between the two of us, but I did come to this country to defeat that demon," I declared.

My words were so insolent that Elyas couldn't help but let out a small laugh. "Then, to lessen your burden, I guess I'll work hard and try to get you two to make up!"

I knew that she always kept an eye out for monsters that wanted to pick a fight with the demon, and she stopped them before they started unnecessary battles. I also knew that she was quietly trying to negotiate an alliance with the monsters gathered in White Castle.

"Ah, that reminds me... Charlotte said that she wanted a wand, of all things. A pixie asking for a wand is bizarre, isn't it? But she seemed deadly serious about it. Oh dear, Slobe, why are you suddenly making such a weird face?"

I had an epiphany. "That's it!"

Back when we were in the capital's castle, I had briefly thought

about a plan to lighten up Charlotte's mood with a present. At the time, I had given up because I didn't know what kind of thing would make her happy, but... *Oh! I'm an idiot! I saw her working so hard for such a long time at Kirsch and I still didn't think of it!*

Without thinking, I took the pixie's hands in mine. "Elyas! Thank you!"

"Huh? Did I say something weird?"

"No! Elyas, the wand! That's it! Why hadn't I realized that up until now?!"

"Uh, yeah. Did you have a eureka moment or something?"

"I did! I can't just stand around here now. I gotta think about where *that* might be!"

As a mage, I had a personal wand. And now that Charlotte had fully awakened as a mage, she also needed a splendid wand of her own. She *was* a royal princess, after all. Charlotte was the most familiar girl to me, over both Alicia and Princess Carina. I knew her well, so I was sure that she would definitely be happy about it.

After all, that thing is in White Castle, isn't it? It was such a brilliant idea. I felt my elation take over me, and...

"I'm tired, but if there's anyone who wants that light spell, I'll do it for you now! First come, first served. Ten people only!" I declared.

And then, well... Suddenly, the orcs that were supposedly asleep started charging in my direction all at once.



Huzak's neighboring countries hadn't noticed at all, but...

Due to a certain human that the orcs called the "demon who steals light," spirits were low among the monsters of Huzak.

Today was yet another day filled with noise and chatter in the orc village, but the village's recent growth could only be called abnormal. On top of that, due to one single monster, the village had also suddenly started regaining light in the evenings.

"The night has become so bright lately. It isn't scary anymore, oink."

"Oink! So many monsters. So fun, oink."

Normally, monsters of different races living in one place would be out of the question. The only exceptions would be in dungeons, where monsters aimed to evolve in the midst of bloodbaths with each other or gather under a defining and overwhelmingly charismatic leader like the Blue Light.

An orc hummed to himself. "The orc village is so lively, oink."

"Goblins are sneaking peeks over here from outside the village, oink!"

What made this even more strange was that the place where these

monsters had gathered was in an *orc* village, of all places. Orcs were made fun of as the lowest of the low by all other monsters.

Even when Elyas had previously asked for their cooperation, the monsters had never come together as one. It took a real and apparent threat like the demon to appear for this to come true. No one would say it out loud, but they were probably all anxious.

Somewhere out past the borders of the village was a human slaughterer who even murdered his own kin. Countless monsters boasting their power challenged the man, but they were all beaten at their own game.

“Oh, ew! Even gremlins are here. I hate them. I’m gonna chase them away, oink.”

“Hey, don’t be mean! Everyone is our friend, oink.”

“Right, oink!” an orc nodded, snorting.

Were the monsters gathering here out of fear of the demon? That was probably part of it, but the actual reason at the core was different, and they all knew it. It was due to a certain orc newcomer whose exciting appearance was like a shining comet flying over the land of Huzak.

There were many rumors about him. One said that he wore human-style clothes. Another claimed that he was a mage. Some rumors even said that he defeated a hydra that had monopolized a lake. Another one said he was so smart that it was hard to believe he was an orc.

And yet another said...that he came to this country to defeat the demon.

Who in the world is this orc mage? many wondered. Curiosity was what led some monsters, who hadn’t expressed any interest in the idea up until now, to gather in the orc village one after another.

“It’s gotten real lively here lately. This is way faster than I expected,” Elyas muttered.

Today, like every other day as of late, Elyas found herself grinning at how the orc village was flourishing.

“But...” she continued, pondering. “I’m just a normal pixie... Would I be able to protect this place like how my sister does?”

In the north, whenever pixies snuck out of the boring forest and entered human settlements, they faced tragic fates. Being hunted down without restraint, placed as objects for viewing, or being used as exhibitions... Due to that history, the pixies had avoided the attention of humans and lived on in the backwoods of nature for a long time.

Elyas continued to mutter under her breath. “If I can’t even lead this number of monsters, I have no right to call myself her older sister.”

She thought back to when a pixie born as a hero made a speech to all of her kin, asking that they venture into the outside world once more.

Before her overwhelming charisma, many monsters had bowed their heads. The headless warrior in full plate armor had dedicated their sword and loyalty, while a crimson dragon had offered their inferno. She had crushed the Dustour troops that had thrust the north into the deepest pits of terror, and even humans had gone down onto their hands and knees before her overflowing brilliance.

Since then, the Blue Light had been revered as the Demon King of the North. And her sister, Elyas, promised that she would build a base where humans and monsters could cooperate in the lands of Huzak. There was no way she could run away from this country just because a single dangerous human had shown up.

A silhouette descended gracefully from the sky, disrupting her thoughts. “Lady Elyas.” It was a monster with wings made for flight, said to have eyes that could survey far into the horizon—a griffin.

This griffin was a bodyguard that the fairy with blue eyes had assigned to Elyas. It had a special air about it, one that didn’t fit in among the other monsters in Huzak. To put it simply, it felt strong, and very much so.

“Eagle Eye,” Elyas addressed. “Did something happen?”

“Lady Elyas, the demon is advancing in the direction of the Freedom Union. However...he has noticed my presence.”

Elyas took a moment to digest its statement. “No way. You’re monitoring him from quite a distance, right?”

“Yes. However, I am afraid to report that this is the truth.” The griffin hesitated before speaking again. “I understand that my proposal is insolent, but if you called for our king—”

Elyas cut them off. “Eagle Eye. If she came here to Huzak, the witch of the Three Musketeers would follow hot on her heels. The Great Four of the South won’t take that lying down either. The precarious equilibrium would tilt, and this country would turn into a battlefield once again.”

“That is a rather soft thing to say,” Eagle Eye said slowly. “Lady Elyas, if you continue staying here in Huzak with how things are, you will die with the orcs.”

“Of course. Eagle Eye, you’ve explained it thoroughly to me, so I understand your opinion. You’re telling me to cast away this village, and by extension Huzak, and to run back to her protection, right?”

“My job is simply to protect you, Lady Elyas. I believe that everything I said is correct.”

“I understand very well what you want to say. Please continue to monitor him as always.”

Eagle Eye went quiet for a moment before speaking again with a somber tone. “Understood. You will end up regretting this choice, however.”

The griffin took off into the vast skies once more. Elyas heaved a deep, heavy sigh as she waved to the monster.

Unsettling topics weren’t her cup of tea. However, she had *promised* that she would protect these lands in the stead of her sister, who had reclaimed them from the vampire’s clutches. *I can’t just throw in the towel due to such trivial difficulties.*

Elyas decided to push those thoughts out of her mind and she stared at her kin, who had been practicing flight. “So, Charlotte, have you already finished your flying practice for today?”

Charlotte was an oddball pixie who couldn’t fly, couldn’t control the wind, and had apparently been with the orc mage ever since she had gone south. Elyas wanted to know how they had ended up together and what their relationship was, but Charlotte would never tell her anything. There was only one fact that Charlotte had told Elyas...and that was that the two had been together for a long, long time.

“Charlotte...?” Elyas called out to her again when there was no answer.

At first, Elyas had felt there was something off about Charlotte. Whenever monsters other than Elyas approached the runaway girl, she would visibly shrink with fear. When asked directly, Charlotte would answer that something terrifying had happened to her in the past. The way she talked about her past seemed to be mixed with a hint of trauma, so Elyas did not ask her to elaborate. Charlotte’s reactions were especially extreme against monsters like Eagle Eye: ones that had wings.

“Ah, so that’s how it is,” Elyas muttered, shaking her head. “I swear, this girl...”

However, over time, Charlotte seemed to have adapted, and she had become very eager to learn about what had happened in Huzak and all about its current state. Thus, Elyas was happy to explain it to her.

The vampire’s army had already been hunted down, and White Castle, where Huzak’s royal family used to live, had been taken over by monsters who played an active role in that effort. Even Elyas couldn’t approach the area thoughtlessly. After Charlotte learned of it all... *She seems to have cheered up a little*, Elyas thought.

“If you’re *that* curious about what Slobe is doing, you can just go over there,” Elyas said, exasperated.

“I-It’s not like I’m curious about him or anything!” Charlotte stammered.

“Is that so? You couldn’t concentrate on your practice though.”

“You have the wrong idea, Miss Elyas!”

And well, as for how Charlotte was faring lately... The moment Elyas took her eyes off Charlotte, she’d always find the girl doing *this*. She would become deaf to Elyas’s words and her eyes would always be trained on *him*. By now, everyone in the orc village was obsessed with him too. Even right at this very moment, a large crowd of orcs had gathered around him, making a snorting fuss.

“Oh *really*. You’re going to say that? You’re *reeeally* going to say that?”

“Wh-What’s with that...that look on your face...?”

“I happen to know that you two are actually quarreling. Let me guess, it’s probably because you’re being unfairly childish and stubborn, isn’t it?”

“I’m not being childish! Or stubborn!”

“Really? After you ran away from home, weren’t you *completely* reliant on Slobe the whole time?”

“I repeat, I didn’t run away from home!”

Whenever night fell, the boy would come to Elyas in secret and ask about Charlotte. He did that without fail every single night. *Anyone would realize it if they saw him going that far to check on her.* The one who had saved Charlotte from the horrible things that she hinted at in her past... It was *him*. *Yet Charlotte is still putting on this aloof act!*

“I think it’s about time you forgive him, don’t you? Your quarrel wasn’t about anything big, right?” Elyas asked.

“It is a big thing to me! It’s not something I can forgive so easily!” In Charlotte’s eyes, she had been deceived for a long time about her real identity.

However...Elyas had long realized that there was more to it. One day, when Charlotte and Elyas had returned to the orc village after sunset, having done their duties that day, they realized that *he* had returned earlier than they had.

This was very rare. Most of the time, the orc mage would be outside the village with the Orc King all the way into the night. Seeing him in the village before her, Charlotte’s eyes sparkled as she hurried his way, and...stopped in her tracks as if a sudden realization struck her.

Though Charlotte had been looking down at the ground, she had probably forgotten all about their fight in that brief moment. *There aren’t many monsters whose changes in emotions are that easy to read, at least not as much as hers,* Elyas thought.

“Charlotte, you actually forgave him a long time ago, didn’t you?”

The girl dragged her feet before finally replying. “You’ve got it wrong, Miss Elyas.”

“I don’t know when exactly you two started fighting, but I bet that you spent such a long time being stubborn that you don’t know what to do now.”

“There’s...no way that’s the case,” Charlotte whispered weakly.

Her feelings are surprisingly obvious. She might deny it, but anyone could tell as long as they stayed by her side long enough. Even when Slobe was teaching me magic, she actually wanted to be near us but she couldn’t bring herself to approach. She’s very clumsy with her own emotions. And that orc mage is veeerrry oblivious as well.

Elyas sighed. “Just like I thought! In that case, why not try leaving it to me?”

What a difficult girl. A pixie falling in love with an orc... It’s probably a first, even if you combed through our entire history. Well, they do say that the more troublesome a kid is, the cuter they are, and that’s not wrong. Thinking that, Elyas walked away from Charlotte...

...And she walked towards the boy who had come to this nature-filled land where a slightly elevated mountain range surrounded a giant forest. She walked up to the boy who had told Elyas and Elyas alone that he had come to Huzak to defeat the demon.

This was a brief moment of peace and respite. Or rather it was supposed to be, but the griffin took a sudden nosedive towards Elyas even though it was supposed to have returned to monitoring the demon.

Elyas felt an ominous premonition. Whenever her instincts reacted like this, something heavy was bound to happen. “Eagle Eye, what is it?”

“Lady Elyas... The Lupus werewolf clan of White Castle has arrived,” the griffin spat.



At that time, I just so happened to have returned to the orc village with Oinkus to eat lunch.

In our usual dining place under the blue skies, I eagerly bit into the pork lined up on display. In Huzak, animals that would typically be kept as livestock were plentiful within the forest.

Suddenly, I was interrupted by a thought. *Wouldn’t this count as cannibalism for orcs?* I looked around. The orcs didn’t seem to care at all as they gobbled the meat down.

One of my mottos was to take my time and savor my food as much as I could during meals, but I sensed something that sent a chill down my spine and had to look up from my meal. A commotion started breaking out within the orc village, but I couldn’t ignore my nagging stomach and resumed eating. And then, I heard a familiar and nostalgic voice.

“Master Slobe! Why are you enjoying a leisurely meal at a time like *this*?!”

“Charlotte?” I hesitated before continuing. “Well, you see, I have a personal rule that dictates I must concentrate on food during meals at least, so... More importantly, everyone seems worked up and is making a fuss about something. Did something happen?”

“Something *did* happen, and something big at that!” Charlotte exclaimed. “A subjugation squad formed in White Castle to defeat the demon. They came here and they’re currently talking with Miss Elyas!”

“Huh.” I cocked an eyebrow. “Now that is news to me. But since I’m an orc, I probably can’t join in on such an important meeting.”

“That might be the case, but still! Hurry up and finish your meal! You’re the only one who’s enjoying food without a care at the moment, Master Slobe!”

“Ah, those guys coming in our direction must be from the subjugation squad,” I muttered.

“Huh?! ”

“Take a look over there.”

A squad of monsters walked across the orc village in succession as the griffin flew in the skies above them. *Looks like the griffin is going to lead them to the demon. Still, from the looks of them, that must be a group of werewolves. I heard that there were several factions residing around White Castle, and the three most famous ones were the demons, the Lupus werewolf clan, and the band of sword demons known as the Sword Ashes. I see that one of those decided to come out.*

It’s the first time I’ve seen them too, but they look ferocious. They’re humanoid wolves equipped with fearsome swords, and they’re probably very experienced in combat. Each and every one of them is armed to the teeth, and the werewolf that seems like the leader is a head above the rest in terms of how burly he looks. In terms of muscle and build, these werewolves would be a good match even against the cyclops that attacked Kirsch Mage Institute.

One of them came up to me. “Heya, orc. Aren’t you that orc mage who’s rumored to have come to defeat the demon?”

But, well, it seemed that there was a guy among the werewolves who was way gaudier than the dungeon master who attacked Kirsch. I knew that monsters could have distinct personalities, but I *really* didn’t want to be associated with this guy. I kept my silence, but this guy just rattled on and on.

“Lately, humans have pretty much stopped coming here at all, so I’ve been starving. So...*we*’ll end that guy. Too bad for you, orc mage, but you won’t be a part of it. We’re going to defeat the human you guys are soooooo scared of. Ya really should thank us for that, ya

know?" The werewolf talked at me with a threatening voice and cackled as they left.

Belligerent and ruthless was the name of their game and the group was in high spirits, probably imagining the slaughter of the demon. Laughing like fierce beasts the whole time, the assassins from White Castle left the orc village. *They must have great confidence in their abilities. They're weird guys, but then again, the world of monsters is a place where power rules above all else. This peaceful orc village is an exception, not the norm.*

"Oink. Don't cry just because they took your lunch, oink," one orc comforted another.

"If they would defeat the demon for us, just one small lunch doesn't matter, oink," the orc replied.

The orcs looked at the group with slight admiration in their eyes. They probably thought that the werewolves just might have a chance to defeat the soldier.

However, a few days later...

It was night, long after the sun had set below the horizon. The haughty-looking griffin returned to the village and the orcs all began to talk noisily.

The griffin only came to the village when it had a report for Elyas that *something* had happened in the forest, and from what I could gather from the chatter, it was never a good sign. To be frank, I knew that the griffin would visit, bringing news of the total destruction of the Lupus clan, but...

"The demon has companions," the griffin said. "Two human children are with the demon."

The *other* news it told Elyas struck me speechless.

Interlude: Journey to the Dungeon City, Zenelaus

Large beads of sweat slid down one after another in an endless stream.

Alicia gasped for breath. “Just how long do those things plan on following us?!”

Shuya panted profusely as he replied. “Ugh, quit complaining and focus on running, Alicia!”

“Remind me, who was the idiot who proposed cutting through Huzak again?!”

“Fine, it was me, but *you’re* the one who said you’d follow! I did try to stop you!” Shuya argued.

Thinking back on it, the Lost Woods outside Kirsch’s campus was a much more favorable and hospitable place for humans compared to *this*. There, monsters feared humans and were generally under control. Even though a huge disaster had happened because of the dungeon spawning, the Lost Woods would probably continue to be used as a place for education.

“Shuya, now there’s a purple slime! Wh-What do I do?!”

“Oh, don’t make such a fuss about a mere slime! *Fire Arrow!*”

Shuya took a moment to catch his breath. “Phew, we can probably get some rest with this.”

But what about this forest, in comparison to the one around Kirsch? Plants and vegetation were left to grow wildly without restraint, and a straight path that probably used to be a road had twigs and branches growing out of it. The ground was a mess. Suspicious-looking fruit grew from tree branches, and the cherry on top was...

“You call this resting?!” Alicia shouted with exasperation. “Ah, there’s more! It’s a giant pile of slime monsters!”

“Hey!” Shuya yelled. “Hey, don’t run off and leave me behind!”

With monsters right behind her, Alicia thought about what had led to this point. *I made a mistake. The emotions that went through my heart back then were all lies. Shuya seemed so dazzling back then, looking as if he made a big, life-changing decision, and I was a little moved, that’s all. A minor emotion.*

All because of that, I jumped right onto the dangerously thin ice of my own volition. I knew that only bad things awaited me if I made this

decision, but I made light of it somehow, thinking that cutting across Huzak couldn't possibly even compare to that incident with the black dragon.

In the end, Alicia was truly no different from Shuya. Her feverish exhilaration from the monster invasion in Kirsch hadn't died down one bit.

"Shuya, you aren't useful at all!" Alicia shouted, indignant. "Leave it all to me,' was it?! What was that all about?! Where did your confidence go?!"

And then, all the events that had happened to the two ever since they had entered the country of monsters flashed back in Alicia's mind.

It was the first day of their entry into the country...though it could barely be called that since Huzak was no longer a country. Since it was the territory of monsters, the border no longer had a clear definition.

Most of the people who would enter Huzak would be adventurers or bandits. With that in mind, it felt like survival training to the two at first and they were very excited about it all. For one, they were mages, and Shuya was even an adventurer to boot. After entering Huzak, they had continued on for a while through a grassy field area with a good view, thinking that monsters wouldn't find them if the pair hid as they advanced.

Or at least, that was what they thought.

"Shuya, I think you probably know what I'm about to say, but..."

"Head back if it's dangerous,' right? I know that! You're such a worrywart, Alicia."

"Shuya..." Alicia was unimpressed. "Do you know just how many adventurers and soldiers died in these lands?"

"I do," Shuya insisted. "That's why I got this, remember?"

The boy with red hair pulled out a scrap of paper. "The types of monsters and their habitats are laid out very precisely on this map. There's even information about extra dangerous places to avoid so that we can head to the Freedom Union from Huzak safely. Thanks to this, my hidden fortune is depleted, but...I guess I'll just earn it back in Zenelaus."

The merchant had gladly sold it to him, saying that obtaining it was worthwhile for him if it could help a student of the mage school.

This map wasn't all that Shuya had prepared. He also had expensive elixirs, knives painted with poison... Shuya and Alicia had combined all of their money and threw it at the merchants to buy any and all things that seemed useful.

By running away on this journey, I'll change myself into someone better, compared to a person who couldn't move an inch during the

incident with the black dragon, they both swore.

“The area we’re in still counts as peaceful. The actual scary things will begin when we take our first step into the forest. Make sure to keep vigilant,” Alicia warned.

Huzak hadn’t been as developed as Daryth or Cirquista before it had been taken over. It was a small country where humans made settlements in the forest and lived in harmony with nature. It was an isolated country that didn’t have much military might.

The paths formed complicated patterns like a labyrinth. An outsider probably couldn’t navigate around the area. The map they had was difficult to understand since it had been made by a previous citizen of Huzak, and the two had a hard time deciphering it.

Before the two came here, however, they read the map over and over again. They forced the necessary geography into their brains and did the best they could so that they wouldn’t be lost. Or at least, that was what they thought, but...

Alicia’s train of thought broke down there. For some reason, right before they were about to enter the forest, her traveling companion began to talk to himself out loud *again*. “Huh...? That path’s a shortcut? Oh, the presence of monsters...is that so?”

Her traveling companion was none other than Shuya Newkern. Back at Kirsch Mage Institute, he was deemed eccentric. Rumors said that he could see someone who didn’t actually exist and that he would whisper to himself out loud sometimes.

“Shuya... Muttering nonsense to yourself like that is creepy, so could you please stop?”

“Huh? Wait, I said that out loud?”

“You did! You mumbled on and on and on!”

“Oops, my bad. I couldn’t help it since I hadn’t heard the voice for a while. But, well, even the map says that entering the forest from here is the shortest path, so... Plus, there are fewer monsters than I expected.”

“How many times do I have to warn you that such naive thoughts would—” Alicia cut herself off. “Hm? I stepped on something.”

By sheer coincidence, she had trampled on the tail of a Black Bear monster, who had been peacefully sleeping like the dead. The now wide-awake Black Bear then chased the two, and they had no choice but to step off their initial path and enter the forest.

The moment they stepped into the forest, they made quite a discovery. *There are monsters here. Wait, aren’t there way too many?! They’re everywhere! There weren’t many monsters along the country border, and there was only a vast grassy field with a good view, and yet...*

The two had finally realized that they had truly come to a crazy

and outlandish place.

And that was just the first day of their journey in Huzak.

During their first evening there, they managed to find a house in the forest by chance. They sprayed a custom-made perfume with a scent that monsters abhorred all over the house. They then decided that they wouldn't take even one step out of the house for the night. The next morning, they woke even earlier than sunrise, and after confirming that there was no trace of monsters around the house, they took their leave.

According to the map, they would arrive in the Freedom Union if they just made their way across the forest in a straight line. Shuya declared with confidence that they would probably make it out of Huzak in around a week as long as they didn't come across any major problems. Though Shuya normally didn't seem reliable on most days, Alicia felt impressed and changed her opinion of him. Of course, she had absolutely no plans of telling him upfront about those thoughts.

"You're really weird for a noble, just like I thought," Alicia commented. "For one, you're registered as an adventurer, and you also try to do unreasonable and reckless things. But in Daryth, doesn't the social status of your family determine your future? Does this stuff really matter?"

"There isn't any law dictating that nobles can't become adventurers," Shuya pointed out. "But that's not all. Even if I'm from a baron household, there are many people from a similar social status who climbed up the ladder in the army. Especially when you consider the soldier who was put in charge of the operation to investigate Huzak! He was selected even though he's rather young."

"Oh really?" Alicia muttered. "You're quite knowledgeable about the topic."

Shuya explained that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of such soldiers, which honestly looked cool in Alicia's eyes. Just a little.

However, at noon, their journey became slightly more complicated...

They had found a clear spring, and Alicia had taken the opportunity to wash up. It was pleasant, and doing this made Alicia feel as if she were truly free. Using magic might clean her body physically, but it couldn't scrub off her mental weariness. She probably would never have tasted this sense of liberation if she had returned to Cirquista like she was supposed to have done.

Looking back, this was probably when Shuya had started becoming cocky. Everything had gone well so far and it was going to his head. He started saying that he wanted to defeat monsters as they

made their way through the country.

“Didn’t you swear that you wouldn’t do things that were uncalled for?!” Alicia snapped.

“Oh come on, just a little won’t do any harm!”

After they had infiltrated Huzak, they had come across many monster corpses that were probably the work of adventurers or soldiers. Both groups had many opportunities to come to Huzak for various reasons. Adventurers wanted to test out their own power, and soldiers came to monitor the situation of the monsters gathered here. Alicia knew that, because just like Daryth, Cirquista also dispatched troops periodically and tried their best to gauge what went on in here.

At first, Alicia chided Shuya for having such thoughts, saying that he would have countless opportunities to fight with monsters once they reached Zenelaus. However, Shuya was very obviously letting his arrogance get into his head.

Shuya’s insistent grumbling was getting on her nerves, so Alicia gave up and told him to do whatever he wanted.

And Shuya’s next action was a blunder of the highest order.

“*Fireball! Fireball!*”

“Ugh, is that all you can cast?!” Alicia shouted. “Even goblins have seen through all your tricks by now!”

He had tried to pick a fight with a weak-looking goblin and was immediately discovered by other monsters. He continued casting spells as the two of them ran.

Finally, Shuya’s mana was depleted completely, and the two could only flee. They continued running away for some time.

“You’re an idiot, aren’t you?! Shuya, you’re an *idiot!!!*” Alicia screamed.

“Alicia, use your spells too!”

“I’m a water mage!” Alicia snapped. “Who’s going to heal you if you get hurt?!”

“...It’s not like we have another option, you know?!” Suddenly, Shuya started mumbling to himself. “Huh? You *what*?! Huuuh?!?!?!?”

“Ugh, stop mumbling to yourself already! Who are you talking to?! It gives me the creeps!”

“No, I’m not talking to myself! I’m having a conversation! Wait, the zombie-type monster is dangerous? Wha— Why’s there a Zombie Soldier here?!” Shuya wailed at the top of his lungs. “We’re gonna make a break for it, Alicia! This way!”

Immediately, Alicia regretted her decision. *I shouldn’t have followed him.* She tried reasoning with Shuya and said that they should return to Daryth at once, but they realized they no longer knew the way back.

They could only rely on the voice Shuya could seemingly hear from the weird crystal ball he had, and they went along according to its instructions. At this point, Alicia was fed up and just left her fate up to Lady Luck.

“Wait, Shuya! A skeleton! There was a *skeleton* just now!”

“A skeleton isn’t anything to make a fuss over! This is the infamous Huzak, remember?! It’s a country occupied by monsters! A country that Cirquista and Daryth have tried taking back but failed each and every time! Ah, hey look! There’s a midget worm monster! I think I can defeat that.”

The flora in Huzak was left to grow wildly without the tampering of humans. Alicia spotted the round worm monster in the grass and she breathed an anticlimactic sigh of relief, for it was smaller than she had thought. Shuya closed in on it, peeved that it surprised him, but *something* fell down from above with a loud bang.

It was a fully grown worm monster. It was *huge*. Alicia knew that worm-type monsters grew rapidly, but... *Isn’t this one way too big?!*

By the time Shuya managed to shout her name, Alicia was long gone, having already run away.

Shuya didn’t have the luxury of time to curse her and call her heartless, and he began running as well.

They ran away as fast as they could; to escape, and to survive.

The night sky could be seen through the gaps in the canopy of leaves. From below, the two could spot the moon, whose light was the only ally sustaining them right now. The pair ran in the direction that the dim light seemed to be leading them.

Bugs were chirping all around them. Many times, they spotted pairs of red eyes, probably belonging to monsters, in the darkness. Fear seized and squeezed hard at their hearts. The wheezes they let out seemed louder than they should be.

Just where had they gone wrong?

We were doomed from the beginning, Alicia concluded. *In the first place, the idea of cutting across Huzak was a mistake. If we manage to get out of this forest alive, I’m going to have to spell it out for Shuya and make him face the facts*, Alicia decided. *He’s a fanatic of pretty rocks and the occult. Someone like him could never become as strong as that guy, and I’m going to tell him that!*

After all, that other guy has been amazing ever since he was a kid. If anything, he was at the peak of his performance when he was a child, actually. Even though he’s regained some of his former glory lately, those childhood days were definitely when he was best. Well, even though he was just a noble, he was able to become my fiancé...the fiancé of the second princess of a major country like Cirquista. That’s something amazing, I’ll have you know!

There, Alicia's mind froze for a moment. *Wait. On that topic... What's the situation right now around...that? Is our engagement still in effect?*

While such thoughts ran through Alicia's mind, she turned around...only to find that the gigantic worm monster was right behind her!

This lone giant worm monster had been chasing them for a long time.

"This is the worst! The worst, I say!" Alicia wailed. "I really shouldn't have followed you here!"

"You're the one who decided to come with me, Alicia!" Shuya shouted. "In fact, I objected to it many times!"

The fear of death loomed in her heart.

Despair was what she had felt back when the dragon had appeared at Kirsch. At the time, she thought that it was blasphemy that she was going to die right there. She was *royalty!*

But this was different. She was a runaway. *That's right. Dying after running away from home is absurd! Ridiculous! Plus, compared to that dragon, a worm monster is nothing.*

The worm made a high-pitched sound as if it were wheezing and squeezing its own throat out. *The heck is with that cry?! Ah. I can't do this. I'm scared. Not only that, it's so fast, even though it's a worm. Aren't caterpillars meant to be, like, oh, I don't know, more easygoing or something? They're meant to be slowpokes that squish under our feet if we aren't careful. Just because such a thing became big, how can it be that fast?!*

"Shuya!" Alicia shouted. "Let's get out into the open grass field!"

"Bad idea! Master said that in times like this, I shouldn't go to places I'm not used to!"

"Master"? Who is that?!"

"Master Cessan, an adventurer! They taught me all about being an adventurer!"

Huzak was a paradise for monsters, and it truly was filled with them. There was no way humans could survive in this land. *I really, really shouldn't have followed Shuya here! Well, I guess I'm also at fault for being moved by some trivial sentiments, but still! Ugh, it's all over. Just who is Master Cessan anyways?!*

She no longer had enough energy to even shout angrily at him about inconsequential things. *I can't breathe. I might trip and fall at any moment. There's nothing more that can be done.* Alicia wept in her heart. *Sorry, father, mother. I was a no-good daughter. I should have just gone back home obediently.*

"Shuya, wait." Alicia slowly came to a stop. "I don't sense that worm anymore."

The angry presence that had been hot on their heels had vanished. The worm had stopped and was looking about absentmindedly. Its eyes had changed from red to green, indicating it was no longer agitated despite being brimming with rage moments ago.

Alicia hesitated. "It's...looking for us?"

Moments later, the worm whined like a puppy, sounding far cuter than it had any right to be. It then shuffled back slowly into the forest. Shuya, who was a few steps farther away than her, also looked dumbstruck.

Hey, what were you doing? Alicia fumed. Help me! Why were you running so far ahead? I'm royalty, so be my shield! This guy... I really can't count on him!

"Alicia," Shuya began slowly. "Just now, that was..."

"I'm pretty sure it was hit by a darkness spell. But Shuya, that wasn't you, right?"

"There's *no way* I could use darkness magic."

While light magic had an aptitude for enhancing one's physical body, darkness magic was related to the heart. An advanced darkness spell had attacked that worm...a spell that wasn't seen often in Daryth, and prized light mages like the teachers at Kirsch probably weren't able to perform. *Who in the world...?*

Alicia's thoughts were cut off by the voice of a stranger.

"Huh. So you're mages."

However, she couldn't spot the silhouette of that person anywhere.

Suddenly, a shadow came down from above. A burly man with paint covering his face alighted from a large tree and stood before them.

The man appearing before the two didn't even give them a name to call him by. He merely said, "If you want to survive, follow me." He then began walking off the path and into the depths of the forest.

Whenever night fell, fog rolled in over the lands of Huzak. There were also ferocious and cunning monsters that only became active at night. Moving around in the darkness with limited vision was not preferable. Yet this mysterious man lit a campfire brazenly and without fear.

"You guys were pretty unlucky," the man remarked. "That thing was abnormally relentless. That aside, aren't you going to eat?"

Isn't he worried that the smoke and light might attract monsters? the pair thought. However, the man began cooking with practiced ease. The way he went about it all was very bold considering where they were, and the pair of students could only watch him with wide eyes. To the two, even the sound of leaves shaking had been enough to

make their fear of monsters creep back up into their hearts.

“Hm? Ah, I see... I do need a fire to make good food, but...I’m also inviting them, you see. I’m advertising my presence to those monsters,” he explained.

He continued. “This meat is from a bird that I caught this morning. It’s good,” he insisted.

The darkness of the night revealed how weak the two students were. Yet, this man laughed, as if there wasn’t anything to be afraid of. Shuya and Alicia stared at the man from the side as he gnawed on the meat, his face lit by the flames. He didn’t look as if he was all talk either.

This strong man, who had saved them from the worm, was the first human they met in Huzak.

He paused, feeling their gazes. “You’re not gonna eat?”

This was when the pair, who had thrown away their luggage and ran all this way, finally remembered something. The fact that they were very, very hungry.

The heat of the fire slowly melted away their extreme tension.

“So, lemme continue. Even if you can use magic, Huzak is too dangerous for two kids. Are you guys reckless or just plain stupid? Or are you suicidal? In the depths of the forest, there are swarms of ogres and even a village ruled by an Orc King. Near White Castle, there are demons, a werewolf clan...you name it. Not only that, but there’s even a griffin monitoring the entirety of Huzak from the skies.” Here, the man paused. “Oh. You two didn’t even notice the griffin, huh.”



Shuya looked up and confirmed with his own eyes that, just as the man said, such a being was in fact lingering in the skies. He shuddered, too shaken to even reply. On top of that, a village ruled by an Orc King? The pair couldn't even imagine how many hundreds of orcs there must be. Once again, they were faced with the realization that they had come to a land filled with monsters.

The man said it was a miracle that the two were able to even survive a few days in Huzak with their power, or lack thereof. "Surely you didn't come to Huzak because you heard the rumors? Though you two don't seem like the type."

"What rumors?" Shuya asked.

The man paused. "On your way here, you probably came across a few human corpses. Monsters have become a lot more active than before. Not only that, but a dragon woke up recently and the monsters of Huzak suffered heavy losses as a result. They're on edge. For someone to enter Huzak in these times like it's some field trip...is absolutely insane."

Goosebumps rose on the pair's skin. *That's right*, they thought. Thinking back, they *had* seen many human bodies on their way here.

Alicia murmured, "There were even Cirquistan soldiers."

"Daryth is the main country dispatching soldiers here, but there have been soldiers from many nations. They probably came to investigate why the monsters have become more active. However, they all died. Even scout squads with military training have fallen like insignificant bugs. That's how things work here. So, how about you two? From the looks of it, you're mages, but if you're struggling against such trivial monsters like you did earlier, you're walking to your own deaths here. Well, that's why I got curious, though. Why in the world did you two come to Huzak?"

"We..." Shuya trailed off before continuing. "Um, we thought it might be a shortcut to Zenelaus, and..."

The man took a long moment before he replied, "A shortcut?"

It must have been an answer that really went beyond his expectations, for the man started laughing loudly. "Don't tell me that you wanted to cut through Huzak so that you can get to the Freedom Union from Daryth? I have no words. You aren't sane. You're knuckleheads."

"Now that I know better, I think I was stupid," Shuya admitted. "I looked down on this place."

Thinking back with a clear mind, even Shuya knew how much of a moron he had been. Those monsters living outside Kirsch were nothing like the real deal at all.

The two had dealt with monsters that had strayed into human

settlements, but right now, their roles were reversed. Shuya had voluntarily chosen to enter the monsters' own territory. This wasn't even anything like a dungeon.

But at the time, he had thought that this was the optimal choice. It had seemed like a shortcut on his way to getting stronger. Now under the cover of night, his head cooled. He knew he had been conceited. *I'm not a person who is strong... Not strong enough to protect others, as Slowe Denning does.*

"Alicia, sorry for dragging you into this..." Shuya muttered weakly.

"There's no need for you to get worked up about that," Alicia replied. "I was the one who decided to follow you."

The man stared at the two with great interest in his eyes, making the pair feel somewhat embarrassed.

"Um... What is your name?" Shuya asked.

His answer was short and clipped. "I don't intend to give it to you."

"Uh... Are you by yourself?" Shuya asked again. From what he could see, the man didn't seem to have any companions.

"I am a solo adventurer. I accepted a special quest from the Adventurers' Guild. My goal..." the man paused before continuing, "...is to destroy the orc village. If that thing expands into a massive settlement, at this rate, it would probably become a threat to neighboring countries."

"Um, where would that happen to be?" Shuya took out his map. "We actually have a map, and..."

"Let me see that." The man snatched the paper forcefully out of Shuya's hands. However, after one glance at the paper, his gaze alternated between the two youths with exasperation in his eyes. "You... Did you actually believe in this kind of sham?"

"Huh?" Shuya let out. "But they said that it's the most accurate map at the moment!"

The man listed off one inaccuracy after another. "It's true that orcs tend to distribute themselves into communities, but the orcs gathered in Huzak are different. Right now, they are all assembled in one place called Collins Village. Likewise, the demons are only around White Castle and nowhere else. I already killed the fenrirs... I didn't finish off the griffin, but I *have* crushed the gremlin nest. As for the ogres... True, they hang around White Castle, but the one ruling over them is actually a cerberus."

He continued, "Did you two seriously believe this kind of ambiguous information without questioning it at all? You two are utterly hopeless fools. This was probably accurate a few months ago, but the state of affairs in this country changes constantly. This thing is

trash right now.”

After this declaration, the man tore the map into pieces and tossed it away.

“Hey!” Alicia yelled. “How much do you think that cost us?!”

“I’ll bring you two to the border between Huzak and the Freedom Union. With that, you shouldn’t have any problems.”

“Wait, really?!” Shuya said, excited.

“Shuya!” Alicia shouted with a chiding tone before pausing and turning to the man. “Hold up! I am glad you saved us, and it would help us a lot if you brought us near the border, but we cannot trust a person who is unable to even state their name.”

“A reasonable reaction,” the man said. “However, do you really have a choice? Returning to Daryth from here is impossible for you two. You couldn’t even deal with a mere worm.”

“That’s...” Alicia trailed off.

“You two may be fools, but you are courageous fools. On top of that, you even happen to have luck on your side since you were saved by me. It would be a waste to forsake you. That’s all.”

With that, the man went silent. Alicia had been taught to keep her distance from darkness mages, and her mood visibly soured. Unfortunately, they didn’t have a choice.

“Get some proper rest today,” the man ordered. “I will keep watch for you.”

If one were to infiltrate Huzak, no matter how powerful they were, they needed to lay low so monsters wouldn’t find them. Shuya had thought that was the standard practice here. The norm.

“Black Golems aren’t a threat at all during the day. They can only unleash their full power at night. Shuya, you’re an adventurer and you don’t know such common knowledge? In the case of golems—”

You... What? Shuya thought in a stupor. *Wait, he...teleported onto the body of the golem just now? From there, how did he...? Why did the golem stop moving?* Shuya didn’t know what was happening. It was all a mystery to him. *Is this what Professor Loco Moco meant in class about the difference that actual combat experience makes?*

The man continued his sentence. “—just like this, if you pierce the core in its skull, it will die. They’re horrifically strong, but they’re like a slowcoach with little intelligence. There’s no need to use magic on something like that. Shuya, your actions are too wasteful. Think before you act.”

On the first day that Shuya and Alicia had infiltrated Huzak, they had immediately used magic to keep any monsters that found them at bay. They would finish off the ones they could defeat, and they would even use magic to aid their escape. That was because Shuya thought

magic was their only method of offense. Due to that, they couldn't move around very well on the second day, perhaps due to fatigue from using too many spells.

However, this man did not use magic and instead used a single spear to take out monsters. He deftly stabbed the weak spot of the golem and destroyed its core in one strike. When Shuya saw that, he was surprised, but fear overtook that shock. He had witnessed a one-sided slaughter.

"As you can see, all kinds of monsters live in Huzak. Most of them are misfit weaklings that took refuge here after running away from the battles in the north. Even then, you could say that this country is sort of like a dungeon. Do you understand now, Shuya? Thoughtlessly casting spells means that you're a less than halfway decent mage. Only rely on magic when you truly need it so you can always preserve as much power as possible. If you find yourself in a battlefield filled with enemies that require you to continuously fire off spells, then know that you're out of your depth."

This man wouldn't reveal his name or his status to the two. *But...he's way too amazing. Alicia said that he's suspicious, but this man is nuts! I've met many adventurers that I respect, but I've never met such a peculiar person before.*

And not only that, but it looked like *monsters* were the ones running away when they saw the man. He seemed to have absolute confidence in himself, as if he were declaring that no monster in these lands could match up to him. However, that confidence was well-founded and stunned Shuya into silence.

Once Shuya spotted the monster hovering in the skies, he nearly collapsed to the ground in surprise. It was a griffin, a predator of the skies and a high-class monster. They were known for being very intelligent, and their aerial assaults were extremely dangerous and almost impossible to avoid.

However, the monster only watched Shuya and the others, and it didn't seem to plan on attacking. The man said that he had nearly finished it off once, but it had managed to escape. With a smile, he had remarked, "That's probably why this griffin is doing that in the skies, looking for an opening to kill me."

Even after that, the man pulverized one monster after another. Golems, centaurs...all sorts of monsters that Shuya thought he never wanted to chance upon, monsters that Shuya would immediately run from if he ever sensed their presence.

A basilisk, which seemed as if it could easily constrict a giant tree trunk with its body, stood still before them. Shuya and Alicia froze, as if they were prey being stared down by their natural predator. Meanwhile, in the darkness, the basilisk and the man met each other's

gaze. The monster then turned and slowly slithered away.

What in the world? What the hell is going on? Shuya thought numbly.

“Did you see that, Shuya? That was a basilisk, said to have the ability to kill humans with its gaze alone. Lowly monsters in Huzak don’t measure up to the real thing. I think you probably see what I mean now.”

Shuya was at a loss for words. *The heck? I have no idea what you mean at all.*

However, Shuya admired the man. There was no way he wouldn’t. After all, Shuya sought power, which was why he had headed towards Zenelaus in the first place.

He thought that following this man might be a faster route to growing stronger instead of training in the Dungeon City. However, the man wouldn’t teach him anything.

“You want to be my disciple? Shuya, that’s nonsense,” he replied, refusing to even humor the idea.

However, along the way, the man *did* teach him some things, and those were tidbits of knowledge necessary for an adventurer.

The man’s spells attacked the monsters faster than Shuya’s magic could, and the boy realized he had never seen this darkness spell before. However, the spell’s only effect was to slow down the monsters’ escape. It definitely seemed that the man had many more spells up his sleeve.

“Um, do you not have a wand?” Alicia asked.

“I don’t. I’ve actually never used one before.” He paused. “What’s with that face? ...Oh, I see. Over here, that’s the norm, huh? However, the Royal Knights of Daryth don’t possess wands either, right? They use swords with the power of a wand. There’s basically no difference.”

“No difference...? Then, that knife of yours... Don’t tell me, is that made out of magical ore?” Alicia hesitated. “Yeah, that’s probably the case...” She breathed out a long sigh. “Just who *are* you?”

“I haven’t asked you two about your identities, so we’re even on that front. However, why are you so set on using wands? Many wands for mages are made from wood cut down in the Deurnam Great Forest, which spirits take a liking to, but that’s not very efficient.”

“That is heresy,” Alicia declared. “Wands take the shape they do because they represent the virtue of nobles.”

“I see. Your opinion sounds very much like what people under such a system would say. However, it doesn’t matter, does it? As long as you use magical ore, anything can take the place of a wand.”

“Magical ore isn’t something that normal citizens can procure.” Alicia paused, turning to Shuya. “Why have you gone all quiet, Shuya? There’s no way you could buy any with your family’s social standing...”

Shuya?”

Shuya had always questioned the necessity of wands. Sure, the consensus was that wands were the trademark of mages, but this man challenged that idea, stating that there wasn't any problem with his ways.

The Royal Knights of Daryth were outstanding mages who were retrained as knights, becoming the shields that protected the royal family. They were mage knights with swordsticks who took pride in their work. Shuya wanted to become one of them one day, just like everyone else did. Even if he tried to explain it to Alicia, she wouldn't understand. *She's, well... Technically, she's regarded as a goody-two-shoes honor student even among the students of Kirsch, after all.*

Shuya finally replied with an annoyed tone, “I know. You don't have to remind me.” He then turned to the man. “But, um... That means that magical ore was used to make the knife you have there, right?”

The man only quirked the corner of his lips slightly, nothing more. *It's probably an affirmative, Shuya thought. But he's not putting it into words. He's such a mysterious person. He's strong, but he has no intentions of telling us anything. He's even aiming to destroy an Orc King's village by himself, so there's no way he's normal.*

“That being said, Shuya, you have talent. Who taught you how to fight? You don't fight like an adventurer,” the man observed.

Shuya hesitated. “I learned a bit of everything from private tutors.”

“Private tutors? Are there private tutors for combat training in the south?”

“I'm actually a noble,” Shuya confessed. “Daryth's... Well, my rank on the peerage isn't very high, though.”

The man's eyes widened.

Alicia poked Shuya in the back, reminding him that their statuses were supposed to be a secret. So that they wouldn't be dragged into trouble, Shuya and Alicia had promised each other to falsely claim that they were commoners who could use magic.

If they revealed that they were nobles, people might hold them for ransom. In a well-known case in Cirquista, an adventurer had once saved a member of the royal family in a dungeon and then turned around and demanded a large sum of money from them as a reward.

“A Daryth noble, huh...” The man trailed off. “Oh, you don't have to worry. I have no interest in that at all.”

Even after knowing Shuya's status, the man didn't change his attitude, and Shuya was happy.

The rest of their journey to their destination could only be

summed up with one word: smooth.

The man had mentioned that he had lived in Huzak for several months, and that showed in his extreme sensitivity to the presence of monsters. He would observe footprints and signs that marked monsters' territory and explain them to Shuya. At night, he would keep watch, vigilant. However, at times when he realized that there were dangerous monsters ahead, he would vanish and exterminate them for the pair.

Their previously perilous journey had now come to the point where it transformed into one with reassurance filling half of their hearts. However, whenever the man spotted an orc, he would strengthen his caution.

"It's an orc! Even someone like me can defeat a mere orc, so I will take care of it!" Shuya exclaimed.

"Don't make a move on the orcs of Huzak yet," the man warned.

"Why would it be bad if I attacked one?" Shuya asked at length.

"There's an orc village I've set my sights on. If we ever made a move on an orc from there, they might be alarmed and escape to the north. I want to avoid that. I'll let the village fatten a little more, then...I'll take them all out in one fell swoop. It would be helpful if monsters from all over Huzak gathered there, but... It seems that even an oddball variant has shown up. An orc mage, of all things."

Shuya took a moment before he could reply. "A what?"

"It's an abnormal specimen who can use magic despite being an orc," the man answered with a savage grin.

Even Shuya, who admired the man, felt his blood freeze over at the sight.

Meanwhile, Alicia was evidently showing her wariness of him. *Just because you're a darkness mage, I don't think you have to be so bloodthirsty, you know?* She left her thoughts unsaid.

Who in the world is this man? No matter how much Shuya racked his brain, he couldn't come up with an answer.

"If we continue with our current pace, we'll reach the border with the Freedom Union by evening the day after tomorrow, or so he said."

Alicia hesitated. "Right."

The girl never thought that she would be able to feel safe at night here in Huzak. Even if they were hiding in a residential house, there was still the risk of monsters breaking inside. Right now, however, that man had volunteered to keep watch over their surroundings. Thanks to that, the pair could completely relax and talk with each other. Yet, to Alicia, she couldn't help but feel as if that man had an unapproachable atmosphere around him.

"Shuya, don't ever let your guard down in front of him," she

warned.

“Jeez, aren’t you being a little too cautious? He’s saved us again and again,” Shuya complained.

“I mean, that man... Something’s definitely off about him. Sometimes, he talks as if he isn’t someone from the south. Not only that, he’s supposed to be an adventurer, but he doesn’t know much about the dungeons in Zenelaus... And on top of that, using something other than a wand is heresy. He definitely isn’t a decent human being!”

“The Royal Knights use swordsticks, though,” Shuya argued. “Even the Guardian Knight uses the Mystical Sword and not a wand.”

“Both Royal Knights and the Guardian Knight were originally nobles from Daryth. They have received suitable training for their titles. That man wouldn’t say a single word about his real identity at all, and that’s *definitely* because there’s something shady about him. I’m sure of it.”

“You’re the same, though.”

“I’m in a position where I must,” Alicia retorted. “And him claiming to be an adventurer is suspicious too. Think about this: that man owns a weapon made with magical ore, but he isn’t a famous adventurer, right? That’s ridiculous. Do you know how much that weapon is worth?! It might even be greater than the weapons of the Royal Knights!”

Shuya hesitated. “But there could always be hidden heroes among adventurers. At the very least, that man is strong, and right now, he’s helping us. He probably isn’t a bad person.”

“*That’s* why I’m so creeped out. Saving us without asking for anything in return... Even if he did it on a whim, he’s going way too far.”

Shuya did not reply.

None of Alicia’s warnings were getting through to him.

He had always questioned whether he could really get stronger by staying at Kirsch. He often bickered with Greatlorde, whose lands neighbored his family’s, and he had fought with the infamous Piggy Duke. Those days had all been great fun, but they hadn’t led to any meaningful increase in power.

Right now, Shuya could mimic this man’s moves, this man’s way of life... To Shuya, that seemed like the obvious recipe for success to reach his goal. However, he could also understand why Alicia was so unsettled, and thus...

“Okay. Then let’s part ways tomorrow morning,” Shuya relented. “Since we’ve come so far, I think we can probably get to the Freedom Union with our own abilities. Would that make you happy?”

Reluctantly, Alicia nodded.

Neither of the two could imagine that the man in question was listening in on every single word of their conversation.

The aloof man sat on a thick branch of a large tree, feeling the cool breeze brush his cheeks. Confirming that the two were fast asleep from the sound of their breathing, the man stopped his spell.

“Darkness magic is much more profound and convenient than you two think. Still...being trusted so wholeheartedly really makes it hard to sustain any ill will against them.”

...Especially Shuya. He already trusts me blindly, and he's probably sleeping with relief on his face right now. What an irredeemable idiot. A gracious, simple soul being that considerate of others in Huzak, which is overflowing with monsters right now? It's hard to believe someone like that could even exist.

“The north and the south are like night and day. Even though I was never particularly well-informed, I don't think I was ever that naive when I was around their age...”

However, he couldn't bring himself to dislike him. For a boy of noble upbringing, he had great willpower and promise.

That was all the more reason why the man was looking forward to their moment of truth. How would Shuya, who utterly believed the man was an adventurer, react when he revealed his true nature?

If the man were to describe his standing using the comparisons of the Country of Knights... He was an influential person who rivaled even direct descendants of the ducal households.

“Just like how the Great Spirit of Darkness saved my ignorant self, the reason why I saved you was on a whim...” The man trailed off. “Indeed, it is difficult to find a reason.”

The man saw himself in Shuya. This Dustour soldier used to be an assassin whose activities brought him to places all over the north. However, when he was younger, he had done something reckless and was faced with inescapable death. His fate was then changed by the mere whim of a very powerful being. If he had to pick a moment that changed the course of his future, then that exact moment was surely it.

“Either way, it doesn't change the fact that this is all a one-sided game at this rate...” he muttered.

He couldn't even count how many times he had dashed through battlefields solo, or the number of times he had cleared dungeons by himself.

The man's claim to fame was as an assassin in northern society, and his reputation had only increased after he had defeated an elf.

When he had taken down his first goblin, he had felt a sense of accomplishment. His first win against an orc soldier had made him

feel like he had improved. His first Ice Golem kill had yielded the height of exhilaration. And when he had bested a stray elf, he had finally become a soldier of the Dustour Empire.

His scars were like medals carved into his body, and together with them, he gradually fell onto the knife's edge between life and death. However, one day, his life turned upside down.

"Shuya, I've given you a chance. If you can realize my identity, my role, and murder me, fate will change. However, that's all just a fantasy. That kind of one-sided, selfish miracle would never happen for anyone. You haven't realized a thing about me, and that's not going to change. That's just how things work in this cruel world."

For the life of just one girl, a surprisingly vast fortune had been invested.

However, the man, then much younger, had never questioned it. If the girl was an associate of someone important in the empire, then there were plenty of people who had grudges against her.

The empire's forceful ways had meant their power was present in every aspect of life. Under this rule, the youth definitely had felt as if he had a bone to pick with it. That was why he would carry out her assassination, and he would draw near her while she was going around secretly.

She had been the perfect picture of defenseless. He hadn't even felt that his fatal spell was needed.

And then, the girl with an ethereal beauty had forced the youth into submission.

He couldn't process what had happened, and he had groveled on the ground, searching for an opening to escape. It was that exact moment when he had realized her identity and gave up on everything.

He had realized that he was hopeless. The girl whose life he had targeted...was the infamous Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij.

The man leaped down from the branch and landed nimbly on his feet, calling out towards the darkness. "Even though I've shown you so many openings, you still haven't revealed yourselves. Are you cowards? Come out. I know that you've been following me this whole time."

In the dark mists where light didn't breach, *something* squirmed.

Since a few days prior, a group of humans had been chasing the man. Though Shuya and Alicia probably didn't notice, it was obvious to him. They were likely adventurers from the Freedom Union.

A few silhouettes quietly slipped into view from the fog. Seeing them, the man whispered to himself. "Just like I thought."

A voice rang out, speech formal and slightly old-fashioned. "With

such an identical appearance, you cannot possibly talk your way out of this. You are the warrior who has been razing Huzak in recent times, are you not?"

"Who knows? You might have the wrong person," the man replied.

"...I shall not ask where you were before you wandered into Huzak. I am an A-class adventurer, and my name is Katana. Be that as it may, under a special quest I received from Zenelaus, I shall now annihilate you."

"The guild master of Zenelaus... That must be the Eye of the Crimson Lotus. I shouldn't have expected less from an S-class adventurer, I suppose. They sure have keen eyes. They realized who I am and finally dispatched people with backbone, huh? But hey, one thing. Kids are sleeping over there. Keep it quiet, won't you?"

Katana paused before barking an order. "Kill him. The Eye of the Crimson Lotus has set magnificent compensation for whoever eliminates this man."

The adventurer party disappeared without a sound and the clash began. The Dustour soldier, Rooney Blough, unleashed his power against the A-class party from Zenelaus who had come to apprehend him.

However, neither Shuya Newkern nor Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista could imagine that such a fight was going on outside, not even in their wildest dreams.

"You're heading on only by yourselves from this point on?" The man paused. "Are you serious, Shuya?"

"Yes. We talked about it last night and we decided on that. We can't just be a burden to you this whole time. Now we know a little more about how to deal with monsters and how to keep an eye out for danger. We will avoid unnecessary battles and head to the border," Shuya said.

The man took a long pause before he replied. "I see. Do as you please."

Shuya had made the declaration that they could make the rest of the journey by themselves since they had come this far.

As they got closer to the border with the Freedom Union, the monsters decreased in number and power. Shuya knew that there was still a risk of them getting into trouble again, but now that they knew how weak they were, they could probably make it through Huzak in a much safer manner than before.

The man continued. "Though...that's what I want to say, but we haven't completely left dangerous territory yet. Leave our parting until tomorrow morning."

The two had become much more robust than when the man had first met them. Seeing that new strength within, his eyes softened slightly.

It was the night before their farewell.

Up until now, they had been lucky enough to find abandoned houses, but that wasn't the case today. This was the first time they would rest out in the open.

Alicia had used a water spell to briefly cleanse the grime from herself, and she now stared into the campfire. It was the first time she had ever slept on the hard ground. With gloom in her heart, Alicia called out to Shuya as he had suddenly stood up. "Shuya, where are you going?"

"We found those adventurers' bodies earlier, remember? I'm going to have a funeral for them."

Now and then, they would come across the corpses of adventurers and soldiers left out in the open at the mercy of the elements. Those were moments that forced the pair to stare at the truth of this world: the survival of the fittest.

Every time, Shuya would use fire magic to cremate the dead. This was a land of monsters, and not one for humans. If the two hadn't met the man, then they might have ended up like that themselves.

"Alicia, I'm heading off for a bit." Shuya disappeared into the fog.

While keeping close to the firewood, Alicia waited for Shuya's return. As for the man, he only talked the bare minimum. Thus, if his admirer was absent, there was only silence. Alicia didn't trust this man as much as Shuya did.

"You're right. That guy is too naive."

Alicia was startled by the sudden voice. "Huh?!"

"I'm saying that he should leave those adventurers with unfamiliar faces alone. They came to Huzak knowing that they might die. And just because I saved his life, he puts too much trust in me. That's naive too."

Alicia felt a chill run down her spine. *Did he see through my thoughts?*

"Confiding in me that he is a noble of Daryth was also foolish..."

The man didn't seem like he liked talking for the sake of talking, and he didn't say another word.

In the end, Alicia wasn't able to trust this man as much as Shuya did. He was likely a terrifyingly strong darkness mage. *I really can't trust him.* That was Alicia's final judgment.

She was thankful that he had saved them. The fact that he was willing to escort them to the border meant that he might actually be

quite a kindhearted person. Thus, if the man ever came to Cirquista, she intended to welcome him with relatively grand hospitality befitting his deeds.

However, Alicia was affected by how she had been dragged into the battles of Sepith and No Face, so she thought that she should keep him at arm's length.

Back then, *that guy* had saved her, but he wasn't around now. That was why she had to be more cautious. *That reminds me. What's that guy doing right now? I heard rumors that he has been invited to Daryth's palace by the queen. If that guy knew I was in Huzak...would he be worried about me?*

Alicia started to feel drowsy due to the warmth of the flames, and she thought about the guy who weighed on her mind. Thus, she didn't immediately realize when Shuya had returned.

"Alicia, get away from that guy."

Alicia hesitated. "Shuya?"

Looking down on the man sitting on a tree stump, Shuya pulled out a magical parchment for everyone else to see.

The mood up until now turned on its head. Something was off.

"This mentions a special quest to eliminate a human from Dustour who infiltrated Huzak and is murdering soldiers and adventurers! Look, the image is identical to you!" Shuya exclaimed.

The man was slow to reply. "How strange. I was sure I killed all the adventurers who saw my face."

The special quests designated by the guild master of the Adventurers' Guild were mostly to exterminate troublesome monsters that appeared in dungeons. However, nations would occasionally request the capture or elimination of criminals of the Adventurers' Guild, who would then prepare special quests in those cases. The magical parchment in Shuya's hands didn't depict a monster; it showed a human's portrait instead.

Thinking that it might be a trick of the light, Alicia looked at it again, but the face on the parchment was clearly the same as the man nearby, whose face was being lit by the campfire.

Alicia's whole body stiffened. Her hands shook uncontrollably and her vision went blurry.

Finally, after coming this far, the pair realized exactly who they had been with up until now, and just how dangerous the man who had been protecting them was.

"Realizing this right at the last second... Shuya, you're unexpectedly unlucky. You know, I brought you all the way here without even telling my name for your own sake. I thought that it would be entertaining if we met on the battlefield again after you grew stronger."

The man laughed, and it rumbled out into the night of Huzak. He rubbed his chin, and it almost seemed as if he had taken off a mask. “However, what’s the point of asking me now? Everything is likely written on the thing you’re holding!”

While in the middle of his journey to Zenelaus, the anime’s protagonist Shuya Newkern had a fateful encounter with one of his archenemies.

Chapter 3: The Seed of a Hero

Wait a minute. Wait. Hold up. Pause. I won't let that slide. Griffin, did you just...

Did you just say that Rooney has companions?!

"That's strange," Elyas murmured. "He's been acting independently all this time, yet he's accompanied by comrades now?"

"They are two human children, and they are mages, but..." The griffin hesitated. "I admit that it is rather difficult for me to judge whether they could be deemed his comrades."

"Hey, Eagle Eye!" I cut in. "You saw everything, right?! Tell me what the hell happened there!"

"A lowly orc jutting into our conversation?" the griffin muttered with distaste. "Know your place."

"I don't mind, Eagle Eye. Please answer him."

Damn, wow. Oh boy, just like Oinkus said, it's a haughty monster! What, does it think I'm incompetent just because I'm an orc?!

The griffin spoke up slowly. "A few days ago, two human children entered Huzak from Daryth. From the information I garnered from reports, I do not think they are Daryth soldiers or experienced adventurers. The pair did not raze residential houses, nor did they attack monsters as adventurers would. The motive for their infiltration is unknown. While I hesitated, trying to come to a decision, a worm monster ended up attacking them, but...that man saved them, and they've been together ever since."

"That demon, who massacred so many humans, is now saving others? Very peculiar," Elyas muttered.

"Could you tell me about any distinct features of the two children?" I asked.

Silence.

"Eagle Eye!" Elyas exclaimed, vexed. "I *said* to stop being mean!"

"It's a red-haired boy with a transparent crystal ball and a girl with golden-blond hair."

I took a sharp intake of breath.

"Slobe? What's wrong?" Concern was evident in Elyas's voice. "You look pale."

That's not it, Elyas. The demon doesn't have companions. There's no way he does. He's a solitary existence who doesn't believe in anyone other than the Great Spirit Nanatrij, whom he idolizes. That man would never

ever make comrades.

“Eagle Eye, please continue. Where are the demon and his comrades heading now?” Elyas asked.

The conversation between Elyas and Eagle Eye after that went in one ear and out the other.

After all, the characteristics Eagle Eye mentioned matched with the pair I was very familiar with. *Shuya and Alicia are... They're traveling with the Dustour soldier.*

“Lady Elyas, what shall we do about this?”

“Hm... It's a difficult problem...”

I was currently standing in the place where those two should have been, all because I took the initiative to twist fate.

I did expect that my actions might cause ripples and change things up somewhere. *But why are they in Huzak? Did they choose this country as a shortcut to Zenelaus just like they did in the anime? No, that's ridiculous. Right now, Shuya doesn't have a reason to head to Zenelaus in the first place.*

“Eagle Eye... In that case...”

“...demon and the children...before they recognize...possible, but that...”

After all...Shuya, the reason why you sought out power in the anime was because of that, right?

When you snuck out of Kirsch with Alicia, you were attacked by monsters, and Professor Loco Moco saved you from your crisis by a hair's breadth. The school holidays started before that event could even happen, so there's no need for you to trace the professor's footsteps and test out your strength in Zenelaus!!!

“...rather extreme...from the skies...with the demon...”

And Shuya, the person you're currently with is your enemy, you know?! True, in the anime, Rooney took a liking to you, but... How in the world did you end up as traveling companions?!

Inwardly, I took a deep breath. *Phew. Now that I've mentally yelled at Shuya to my heart's content, my mind is clear.*

“Elyas,” I spoke up. “Please don't attack the people accompanying the demon.”

“Orc, do you think you're in a position where you can order us around?” the griffin hissed. “You've been insolent during this entire meeting. Who do you think you are? Sure, you defeated the hydra, but don't let it get to your head.”

A mere orc was talking to the pixie that ruled Huzak and one of her supporting pillars as if they were equals. Moreover, he was even

daring to give them orders! That was probably what Eagle Eye was thinking as it visibly showed its revulsion, but I didn't have the heart to care. The words I was about to speak would decide the pair's fate. I couldn't mess this up.

"That man didn't just kill human soldiers, he even slaughtered adventurers. There's no way he would let two burdens join him as his allies, considering all he has done. Also, just because they're together, it doesn't mean they must be comrades. Just like how you don't think that I'm your comrade since I'm an orc, Eagle Eye."

The griffin hummed, seemingly with slight amusement. "Indeed, you make a good point. I commend you for noticing."

"You're an unpleasant fellow," I muttered at length. "But if you're telling the truth, that demon is bringing the human children towards the Freedom Union, right? If we lay low and just watch, they will likely disappear from these lands on their own in a few days. Now that the werewolf clan has been eliminated, you shouldn't waste any more lives. If you attack him, he's going to turn the tables on you."

"Orc mage..." The griffin trailed off. "You seem to be very well-informed about that demon, I see."

"Yeah. After all, I came to this country to defeat him," I declared.

After that, Eagle Eye ignored me altogether, as if I were beneath its attention. However, I could say that the conversation mostly went in the direction I wanted it to.

Among the monsters, Eagle Eye was the most knowledgeable about how terrifyingly powerful the demon was. After all, it was the only one that had survived after making an attack on the man.

The griffin reported to Elyas about how foolish it would be to fight the demon and once more suggested returning to the north temporarily. However, Elyas refused to budge, saying that she had no intention of forsaking the orc village. Elyas said that as long as they were able to amass more monsters, they could win against the demon. She decided that Eagle Eye would resume monitoring the demon from the skies.

"The werewoofs were all crushed, oink..."

"Werewolves, oink. But if even *they* can't win against that demon, then us orcs would only get killed by him no matter what we do. At this point, I don't care anymore, oink."

Somehow, the topic of Shuya and Alicia had managed to conclude peacefully. The biggest contributor was the fact that Eagle Eye, who monitored the demon, didn't really wish to attack him in the first place. The griffin had been constantly monitoring the man and knew his strength better than anyone else.

Phew... That really made me panic. Actually, especially since I know what happened in the anime, I understand how abnormal their actions are. This is Huzak, you know? Huzak!!!

Even after all the time I've spent here, I haven't spotted a single human. Trying to infiltrate such a place is just asking to be killed! This isn't the place for a picnic, you know!

"Master Slowe, look... The orc village is..."

"It's as if we're at a wake," I observed.

Even though everyone said that they hated monsters from White Castle because of how violent they were, somewhere in their hearts, they had probably placed their hopes on the werewolves. They had hoped that those monsters just might defeat the demon for them.

However, the werewolves' campaign had ended with the worst outcome possible: complete annihilation.

"Wouldn't it be better if we ran back to the north, oink?"

"This isn't a paradise at all, oink!"

News of the destruction of the werewolves was so devastating to morale that even such comments were being made. A miserable gloom had been cast over the whole village.

Despite all that, on a certain morning a few days later...

Bang bang! Bang bang bang!

"Slobe! Wake up, oink!"

The loud banging continued. This time in two consecutive, staccato trios.

"Someone's injured! Oinpigus, your neighbor three houses over, has strained his back! We aren't able to do anything about it! Please use your healing, oink!"

The banging was obnoxious, loud, and had a rhythm to it now, a slight variation from the earlier pattern.

"Wake up, Slobe! It's morning, oink!"

Someone pounded on the door as they snorted, and they were so loud. *What the hell? Are you planning on exploiting and wringing out this orc mage until my mana runs dry?! And it's not morning, mind you! It's still nighttime! Also, don't you go around changing up the rhythm of your knocks! You're an orc, damn it!*

"Ugh, those guys..." I muttered, exasperated. *They had just been all gloomy because of the Lupus clan's defeat, but now they're like this again. Whenever something happens, they come calling for me. Thanks to these guys, I'm sleep-deprived.*

Getting up, I noticed that Charlotte was groaning in her sleep in the bed next to mine. For the past few days, Elyas had been running around Huzak busily as if this were an optimal chance to gather comrades, and Charlotte had returned home late as well.

I was worried about them, but Elyas had mentioned that there had

been a large shift in the balance of power around White Castle due to the loss of the Lupus clan. Because of that, there seemed to be a realistic chance of the remainder of the monsters in that area cooperating.

Once I left my house, I found the Orc King standing alone in the darkness, just as noisy as usual.

“Hey! I *told* you to be quiet at night, remember?! Charlotte’s sleeping!” I hissed.

“Slobe! Gramps fell over and skinned his knee! It’s an emergency, oink!”

The weary and drained look on his face couldn’t be ignored. *This guy...he hasn’t been sleeping, has he? Pretending he’s fine, huh? He must be deliberately putting on a cheerful facade because he’s the Orc King who looks after the village.*

“Yes, yes,” I replied at length. “I’m coming.”

That was why I decided that I would go along with the orc who was trying to stay in high spirits.

A crowd of orcs lined up, each one of them asking me to use a *Heal* on them. That didn’t necessarily mean that everyone in the queue was sick or injured. The healthy ones were probably just reminiscing on the pleasant days before the Lupus clan was crushed.

“*Heal* feels real nice and it’s amaaazing, oink.”

“Slobe! The pain’s gone, oink!”

“Slobe is an orc mage, oink.”

“Slobe is an orc *doctor*, oink!”

Still, I’m amazed. They cried and wailed so much just a little while ago, and now this. These suck-ups sure recover fast! Not only that, but even more and more of them are coming out from the other houses, with no end in sight... It’s like they’re zombies or something.

They’re so attached to me, but it’s not like it’s anything to write home about. I mean, they’re just orcs, you know?

There was a loud, deafening roar from somewhere past the crowd. “Cast a *Heal* on me too!”

I took a look. “That guy’s...a new face.”

It seemed that rumors about me had been spreading across Huzak, and more and more monsters were rapidly coming to gather in the village. And in very large numbers, no less. *Ah, is that an actual zombie I see over there?*

Wait, a Heal spell on a zombie? Is that really okay? Doesn’t healing magic typically hurt those guys? But, well, it’s the zombie’s turn now, so I guess I’ll cast it for the time being... Ah, it looks pretty comfortable with it.

In the end, the destruction of the werewolves had also affected

monsters that had once lived independently like lone wolves. Here and there, I could spot monsters that I definitely hadn't spotted in this village before like zombies and skeletons. There were even monsters here that obviously looked down on orcs, like gremlins and goblins.

"Ah, the skeleton cut into the queue! Hey you, go to the back of the line, oink."

"Butting in is bad, oink."

"Is it really okay for a zombie to receive a *Heal*, oink?"

"I dunno, oink."

Wait a minute. Isn't knowledge of my existence a little too widespread among the monsters in this country?

This continued on and on, and before I knew it, it was noon.

"Slobe's first to arrive at a meal again, oink," an elderly orc muttered.

"Slobe's a mage, so it's fine. My grandson caught a cold and Slobe also helped heal him. May the deities bless him, oink."

"Please cast a *Heal* on me agaaain!" A roar followed.

Still, I really didn't think I'd have a class change from orc mage to orc doctor!!! All right, all of ya, get outta my way!!!!!!!

Is this meat poultry? Pork? Nah, it's probably not pork. No matter how I think about it, I can't help but feel like it's cannibalism for orcs. But well, as long as it tastes good, anything goes, I guess.

Being able to eat until we were full in a place like this with no human presence at all was a tremendously luxurious thing. In fact, food had been the thing Charlotte and I had been most worried about for our time here in Huzak. While I had been obsessing over the *Transformation* spell back at the border with Daryth, Charlotte had her head stuck in books about edible wild plants, just in case.

Even though they are monsters, they really eat well! These guys... Apparently, they ate preserved foods left in abandoned houses and that changed their perception of the world, making them snort in awe of the super delicious food. That experience opened their eyes to the wide world of cuisine.

To add to that, recently, all kinds of monsters have been bringing me offerings because I've helped them a lot, so my food intake has been pretty rich in variety lately.

"I've been wondering for a bit, what are those guys making?" I asked.

So, uh... For some reason, there was a huge clay statue being constructed in the heart of the village. Elderly orc grandpas gave out instructions to younger orcs. On top of that, monsters that weren't even orcs were helping out too. The one thing they had in common

was that they were all monsters I had helped, either by casting a *Heal* spell or solving other various troubles.

At first, I thought the monsters were starting off yet another random project to pass the time. But after a few days of work, the lump of clay finally began to take on a shape, and I figured out what everyone was making at last. A statue.

"It's a statue of Slobe, who appeared in our orc village, oink!" one orc chirped.

"You helped clean up the spring, so this is our thanks! Everyone's really grateful, oink."

"This is really embarrassing, ya know...?" I mumbled. "I haven't done anything that significant..."

Huzak's reputation as a land of respite for the monsters had already begun to crumble. It was almost as if they were trying to find a creative outlet for their frustrations. The monsters engrossed themselves with making a statue modeled after me. *What will Charlotte think when she sees such a misshapen statue? This is so embarrassing... Ack... But I can't tell them to stop making it either.*

I groaned to myself, snorting, and right at that moment...

"Alert! Li'l Charlotte Warning is in effect now, oink!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Tension rose in everyone's bodies with a snap, sharp and rapid like lightning. All the orcs looked down at once with grim looks on their faces. I also remembered what I ought to do. I turned to the ground and motionlessly waited for it to pass.

Whenever Charlotte flew in the skies of the orc village, we were told that we must not look up. *That's because if we did...we'd see her panties. It can't be helped.* Perhaps due to days and days of intensive training, Charlotte was now able to fly. *Well, very sluggishly, but still.*

A kobold who had come here from outside to receive food was very shaken by our actions. "What are these guys even *doing*, woof?"

"Just like I thought, orcs are fools, woof..." another kobold muttered. "If we eat some orc's food right now, they might not find out. They're looking down and are so dumb, they won't even realize it."

A long, insistent roar rang out. "Still no *Heal* for me yeeet?!"

Hey, I can hear you all loud and clear! And if you snatch and steal someone else's food, you'd be banned from this village, ya know? The nearby orcs also seemed to have heard the kobolds, and they began to tremble with worry that the plates of food before them might be stolen. Of course, I was one of them.

The fidgeting in everyone's legs became rather fierce, and even Oinkus, who was next to me, seemed quite highly strung because of the movement. *Please, hurry up and end, Charlotte Warning! At this rate, this could be detrimental to the orcs' health.*

I glanced up a little. I witnessed an incriminating moment when the pair of kobolds were just about to pinch up food from an unfamiliar orc and stuff it into their mouths.

“I-I’m just joking, woof.”

“That’s right, woof...”

“Li’l Charlotte Warning is lifted, oink!!!!!!!!!!”

Phew, finally! Just like the others, I stood up with a groan and lightly stretched my limbs. Here and there, I spotted monsters talking to each other with hushed voices.

“My back hurts, oink,” an elderly orc complained.

“I suppose I’ll get Slobe to cast *Heal* on me again, oink.”

Thanks to the Charlotte Warning, the gloom hanging over the village had been blasted away. *Probably because there are so many monsters that act so impulsively like this in this village, the monsters around White Castle look down on the village’s residents as pitiful creatures.*

But at the same time, to me, this village has started to become a cozy place.

“We’re going to resume work on the Slobe statue! Everyone, gather ’round, oink!”

But that’s the one thing I wish they’d stop!

“Slobe. So here you were.”

My name was called with a slightly funny pronunciation and I turned around. There, I found a forest fairy with a smaller body than mine; in other words, a pixie.

“Elyas, welcome back,” I greeted her. “Any luck out there?”

“Yeah. The goblins finally said they’d join us.”

“Those timid goblins? That’s amazing.”

“Apparently, the purification of the lake was their main reason for holding back. So, it’s all thanks to you, Slobe.”

“Nah, you’re giving me too much credit. You’ve been constantly on the move lately though, right? Shouldn’t you rest for one day at least?”

Weariness laced Elyas’s features. She was trying to gather the monsters of Huzak and band them together to work for a common cause. It was a feat not unlike trying to herd thousands of cats. She probably had a mountain of mental exhaustion weighing her down. Apparently, the presence of her kin, Charlotte, soothed her worries to a certain extent, but Elyas had been crammed with work lately.

“I don’t have the time to spare... After all, the monsters of White Castle have agreed to hear me out at last.”

White Castle was an important base in the south which even

Rooney wished to obtain. It was also the stage for a major battle in the anime.

Finally, the time had come. *Those big shots over there stopped dragging their feet and made a decision, huh? No matter which world you're in, the higher you go up the ladder as the boss, the slower you are to act. And in that case, someone like me, who has transformed into a monster to move around in secret, would probably be the most insignificant of small fries.*

"So, Elyas, would you bring me along with you?"

"Yes. They look down on us, and that's all the more reason why I want skilled monsters with me."

"Leave it to me. At last, huh...?"

"The destruction of the Lupus clan affected them deeply, as one would expect. Even though their opponent was one single human, those guys around White Castle were treating him with as much caution as they would have against the might of the Dustour military forces."

"You're going to bring a lot of skilled monsters with you to White Castle, right? Will the orc village be safe during your absence? Where is the demon right now, anyway?"

According to Eagle Eye, the demon and his two human children companions were currently very close to the border with the Freedom Union.

Even in the anime, Rooney took a liking to Shuya, so I supposed there wasn't any need for me to be worried about them since they'd come so far. They probably had an opportunity to get on each other's good sides or something.

Those guys haven't got any clue about Rooney's identity all the way to the end, huh? For a guy with an overflowing sense of justice like Shuya, he'd probably be pretty obsessed with catching Rooney if the cat ever got out of the bag...and if that happened, that might have been the worst-case scenario.

From that perspective, the fact that they never questioned Rooney's real identity is probably a silver lining in all this mess. I took a deep breath. Okay. When I meet those guys again after Kirsch is reconstructed, I'll indirectly scold them about following a suspicious stranger. I swore this in my heart.

"Slobe, we intend to leave for White Castle while the humans are far away."

"I guess that means that these few days are our chance?"

"Indeed. However, according to Eagle Eye, when the demon was attacked by the werewolves, he seemed to have noticed that we were trying to rally our forces... I haven't even told this to the orcs yet, but

that man declared that he was going to attack us soon. A big fight is right on the horizon.”

Rooney was a human who sought out pleasure in battles. Thinking that nothing could match him in Huzak right now, he would probably attack this village after letting it ripen for the picking. To be specific, I thought he'd attack us right as we would meet up with those guys from White Castle.

I considered it many times, but I knew that an ambush would never work on a guy like him. That guy towered over me in terms of battle experience. Unlike Sepith, who specialized in defense, and No Face, who mainly did the work and sabotage of a spy, Rooney was a professional fighter. If possible, I didn't want to face him head-on.

Thus, I was a little relieved that I was able to get into the good graces of the monsters in this village. If everyone continued to pressure Rooney with their presence during a conflict, it would make things much easier for me.

This might have been the first time Charlotte and I could eat dinner with just the two of us ever since we came to this country. Trying to lighten the atmosphere, I told her funny stories about just how much of a scaredy-cat the orcs were, but Charlotte didn't let out a single chuckle.

“Charlotte, are you really nervous right now?”

It took Charlotte a long while before she could reply. “I am.” Her face was tense with anxiety, and it seemed that those words were all she could say.

Still, being able to reach White Castle without any problems... Frankly speaking, it would be a miracle. The most belligerent races of monsters have taken up residence in that deepest part of Huzak, and it's a place where even veteran soldiers and adventurers wouldn't be able to reach. If I remember correctly, before we left, Marco insisted many times that I mustn't go near there.

Even if she's a villain, it was very much worth borrowing the magical artifact from No Face.

“It's all thanks to you, Master Slowe. I...I'm glad I came here as a pixie.”

“Huh? That's not the case at all. It's because you worked hard, Charlotte.”

“I was only following Miss Elyas. I didn't actually do anything,” Charlotte argued. “And I was only able to be with her because you turned me into a pixie, so... Yeah, the reason why I was able to come so far was definitely thanks to you, Master Slowe.”

Well, I suppose you could say that's the reason why Elyas showed an interest in her. If Charlotte was something other than a pixie, Elyas

probably would have thought of her as just another new monster in the orc village.

After that, Charlotte told me about what she had been doing up until now. I heard about it from Elyas every night after Charlotte was sound asleep, but as I thought, it was different from hearing Charlotte talk about it herself.

It was just a casual conversation. There wasn't anything special about it. Before I had revealed the truth to her back at Kirsch, we had shared such a moment every day, and it had been the norm.

It felt both nostalgic and fresh. While savoring these two contrary emotions in my heart, I listened to her talk. Suddenly, I was reminded of a similar scene that happened a while ago.

It was...that's right. It was back when we first entered Kirsch Mage Institute. Charlotte came to my room every night, talking in detail about work and other events she experienced that day. I was someone who didn't have any friends, but she still told me everything. I relished such a memory as I listened to Charlotte talk until she couldn't keep her drowsiness at bay any longer and let out a yawn.

Even now, she probably felt conflicted about me in her heart because I hadn't told her the truth for such a long time. Yet, when I looked at her retreating form as she headed to the bedroom, she seemed somewhat reluctant to part.

"Slowe."

"Ah, it's you, the Great Spirit of Wind. You're awake for a change. Did you sleep too much today and now you feel too awake to sleep or something?"

"It's not 'for a change.' Today, like all days, I worked hard to protect Charlotte the whole time, meow."

I had to take a moment before I could reply. "Well, you're *such* a great help. So, what is it?"

"If you were to strain yourself, Charlotte would be sad. That's all I wanted to say, meow."

With that, the spirit returned to the bedroom again. The Great Spirit had been idling about the whole time. They always went to sleep earlier than everyone else, and even Charlotte treated them as a pet and nothing more.

I hesitated. "If you really would work hard, Great Spirit, then I wouldn't have to strain myself, you know?"

But I would. I *would* work myself hard, regardless. Right now, I was at a critical moment that determined whether or not I could change the future.

In the future that the anime had shown, many people perished and many towns were destroyed. One of the most significant losses

was Zenelaus, which was attacked by one of the Three Musketeers, who were hailed as heroes in the north. In the anime, that city was completely wiped off the map.

If I was going to change such a future, how would I do that if I wasn't even able to put in this much effort?

Rooney, I know exactly when you're going to attack us. And then, you're most likely going to use that spell, just like you did in the anime. The spell that has earned you the moniker of the "demon who steals light" from the orcs.

And that precise moment when you lift that spell... That will be my golden opportunity.

However, there are still some things that I'm worried about. Just in case, I set up a fail-safe to check what his goal is, but it's not perfect at all. If I want to win for sure, I absolutely need her cooperation.

...I know that. I have known that from the very beginning.

I woke up at daybreak, just when the sun was about to announce its presence at any moment.

The night before, I had ended up thinking about a lot of things. This was a little out of character for me, and I couldn't sleep. However, after yet another loop of questioning myself and searching for the answers in my own mind, I had come to a conclusion.

My head was still foggy, but I moved carefully so that I didn't wake her and headed outside.

I opened the door, feeling the fresh air on my body. Outside, there was another world before my eyes. *Well, more like an orc village.*

Even when we had first arrived, there hadn't been just orcs here, and we had been surprised by the variety of monsters. However, now, there was a whole melting pot of monster races here.

...And they were all afraid.

The assassins from White Castle had been killed, and it was their turn next. Everyone knew in their gut that a confrontation couldn't be avoided. At first, the demon had attacked humans, and now adventurers and soldiers from various countries had disappeared from Huzak. Only monsters were left here, and yet the demon still prowled about these lands.

Very soon, this orc village would probably become a battlefield. Their fears were correct.

"Is Elyas around?" I asked.

"She is right ahead," the monster standing guard replied.

"You'll let me through? Thanks."

"Lady Elyas has told me to grant all wishes of the orc mage at any cost. That's why I am letting you in."

Elyas's bodyguard told me her whereabouts without a struggle, which I honestly didn't expect.

These guys have also realized what's happening. Nobody knows how things will turn out, but today, fate is going to change.

Her bed was in the forest. They say that pixies, who had lived in hiding and in fear, always made sure that they were prepared to make a run for it at any moment. Indeed, just like what I read in the book, she rested her tiny body on the branch of an extremely tall tree.

I looked up. Just like I had thought, she didn't seem like the type who had the capacity to lead a country. However, she had slowly collected bits and pieces of trust from others over time, and the culmination of that led to the monsters of Huzak recognizing her as their leader.

I watched her face, deep in sleep, for a while. Then, she opened her bleary eyes.

"Good morning, Elyas."

There was silence for a moment. "Slobe. How long have you been there?"

"Since just now."

"They must really trust you. I told them not to let anyone pass because I'm not a morning person... So, what business do you have with me?"

"I came here to say thank you."

At first, she didn't seem to understand what I meant, but it seemed to click immediately. "You two were able to make up?"

"We took a step in the right direction, at least. I have you to thank, so I thought I'd come here to express that."

She gave a small chuckle. "I haven't done anything." She smiled peacefully.

She's so humble that it's a crime. The way she was willing to be friendly with Charlotte, the fact that she'd bring us to White Castle... I also knew that Elyas had done a lot to try to be helpful so that Charlotte and I could fix our relationship, like telling Charlotte that even though I was an orc, I had much promise.

Elyas's kindness had really saved us in many ways.

"More importantly, Slobe. The time is finally here."

"Hm?"

"I'm talking about Charlotte. She was happy, wasn't she? She's finally able to head to the place she has wanted to go." Though her words were ones of celebration, Elyas looked lonely.



She murmured, "That's why...I'm a little wistful."

"Wistful? Why?" I asked.

"I mean... You're going to leave soon, aren't you?"

On reflex, I froze.

"You don't have to be so guarded. You know, I also had a lot of fun because you two came here. Plus, because a very rare pair of pixie and orc like you two showed up, everyone learned that even races that weren't too friendly with each other could cooperate. I'm really thankful to you, and if possible, I want you two to be here forever. But that's me being selfish. After all, you two are very different from us."

"You—"

The possibility that Elyas had realized our real identities...

She had been so considerate and caring for us that this thought had popped up in my mind before, but...*she really did notice.*

"I was with her all this time, remember? But I don't think your companion Oinkus noticed. That guy's pretty oblivious." She giggled. "Isn't he?"

"Yeah. Oinkus is thickheaded, and that made things easy for me. If I had to go up against you though, I don't know whether I would have been able to fool you until the end."

I had also talked about this with Charlotte last night. After we accomplished our goals, we would swiftly leave Huzak...and this orc village. *Like I thought, you saw right through us. But even if that's the case, that's fine. Actually, that's the best-case scenario.*

She went along with our make-believe because we were convenient variables that helped her gather monsters in this village. It had been a calculated risk on her part.

And yet, even now, she was gentle and peaceful. Seeing her like that... *Yeah. I can proudly declare that my conclusion was right.*

"Then, well... I suppose I can," I muttered to myself. "From what I've seen from you now, I can trust you. No, I *want* to trust you."

"What is it?"

"Elyas, there's something important I want to tell you."

"Something important? Are you possibly going to talk about you two's... No, Charlotte's past, and why she wants to head back to White Castle?"

Charlotte's past was probably important to Elyas, who had realized that we were humans. Her choice of words suggested to me that she might also have an idea about who Charlotte was.

However, I clearly shot that down. "No. It's something way more important than our identities. Elyas, even if you group up with the monsters in White Castle, you guys can't win against the demon. There is only total destruction lying ahead."

“I’m surprised... You’re saying the exact same thing Eagle Eye did.”

“Yeah. Though it pains me to admit it, we have the same opinion on this.”

“But I think differently. If everyone joins their hands together, we *can* win. Even if we lose, I think that this fight would be very meaningful. That’s why...” She hesitated. “Even though I realized you two had a big secret, I kept my silence. You know, Slobe, I love this village, so I could never run away alone. That is who I am. Are you telling *me* to throw away Huzak, just like all the others say?”

“Not at all, Elyas.”

On top of being a professional fighter, Rooney was also a slaughterer. In order to get the most enjoyment out of crushing the village and its inhabitants as he finished his mission in Huzak, he would likely target the orc village she had built up after monsters had gathered here in masses.

If I fought against that guy head-on, my chance of winning was no better than a flip of a coin. It wasn’t bad for going against a guy that would be a certain loss in the anime, but it was way too low for a fight that would decide the future.

“The thing is, I didn’t come here to tell you to run away.”

“Then why?”

In the end, until this very moment, I had never trusted her fully from the bottom of my heart. Elyas was a monster. I never thought she could trust me wholeheartedly.

But now...I felt as if I was finally able to know her true feelings, and thus, I said this.

“I’m here to ask that you lend me your life to change the future.”



Elyas led the charge, and she looked very on edge.

Since there were a ridiculous number of monsters in the village, I thought that we might head to White Castle as a giant group, but it turned out we had way fewer monsters than I expected. At the very back of the group, Charlotte and I walked slowly.

In the front, Elyas had an entourage of skilled bodyguards with her, and they spoke to each other in low voices. They were probably talking about gruesome topics that they didn’t want us to overhear.

“All the way at the back...?” I complained.

“It can’t be helped. We’re the newest of the bunch in this group. But there are very few monsters here... I thought she might bring a lot more with her, but even in the skies, there’s only Eagle Eye.”

Like Charlotte had said, I could spot the prideful griffin in the sky.

That griffin would sometimes twist only its head around, seemingly looking somewhere specific. *Wait, is it still monitoring the demon from here? No way, right...?*

Apparently, Eagle Eye had the ability to see far into the horizon. *Very convenient power, that one. With that ability, it makes sense that the Demon King of the North made use of it and chose the monster to be Elyas's bodyguard. It looks like it butts heads with Elyas in terms of opinion sometimes, but it's a realist that insisted we shouldn't engage the demon until the very end of the debate.*

"I never thought I'd really be able to come back to White Castle... This isn't a dream, is it?"

"It's *not* a dream. But we were only allowed to accompany them to White Castle because you tried really hard and gained everyone's approval. Elyas often said that too."

"I've nearly never seen you together with Miss Elyas though, Master Slowe. When did you speak with her?"

"Uh, that's, well..." *In the evenings after you were already sleeping like a log*, was what I thought, but I hesitated to put it into speech.

Yeah, that's right. I asked Elyas every day about how Charlotte was doing. I'm a worrywart. It's Charlotte we're talking about, you know? That should explain everything.

"Ah, speaking of which, Charlotte! After we arrive at White Castle, there's something I want to give you!"

Charlotte hesitated. "Me?"

"It's something perfect for you right now. Please look forward to it." I heard from Elyas that Charlotte wanted her own exclusive wand, and I came up with an idea for a present.

There was a certain item hidden away in the treasure room of White Castle. Something passed down to the kings of Huzak from generation to generation...the Seed of a Hero.

It was one of a kind in this whole world, an incredible weapon that could change into all kinds of forms depending on the traits of its owner, whether it be a sword or a wand. If it ever got out into the market, it could fetch a price that could build a small castle.

Originally, it had a great power that would have been bequeathed only to S-class adventurers, the strongest powerhouses of the Adventurers' Guild. If I gave it to Charlotte, I thought that it would evolve into a wand for sure.

When I spotted the very tiny outline of White Castle ahead of us, I became a little excited about how elated Charlotte would be.

Accepted by monsters as one of their own and granted permission to come along, she had finally managed to reach this place. The tremendous amount of hardship she had faced would surely mean that

her happiness would be just as great...

However, that thought didn't continue for long. We advanced down the path that led to her childhood home, and our view gradually opened and allowed us to see it better. Charlotte spotted giant trees growing wildly at the end of our path, some of which seemed as tall as the tip of White Castle, and the sight suddenly stopped her in her tracks. The trees climbed high into the skies, almost as if they were reaching for the sun, and Charlotte was stunned into silence as she looked at them.

"Huh? Wait, really?" I asked.

"These definitely weren't there! I would definitely remember there being such giant trees, even if I was really young back then!"

"That's strange," I muttered, considering.

Personally, I didn't feel it was off in any way. Sure, the area around White Castle was bizarre, like a natural disaster had occurred to cause it to sit jarringly against the normalcy of everywhere else, but it seemed just fine to me. After all, I *had* seen it in the anime.

"Master Slowe, how could trees grow to such extreme heights in only ten years? Is that even possible?"

"There's the chance that a dryad might have inhabited the trees, but..." Even though I was the one who had brought it up, I knew there was no way that could be true. Dryads were monsters that couldn't cohabitate with other living things, and they wouldn't allow there to be anything else alive around them.

"Other than that, well... I don't really want to think about this case, but... If the Seed of a Hero fell onto the ground, I guess? If that touched the earth, it could really mess up the ecosystem."

"Wha..."

"Charlotte? What's wrong?"

Charlotte's mouth opened wide, closed, and opened again as she looked down, much like a goldfish. Her face only grew paler by the minute, and I had a very, veery bad feeling about this. *Whatever your intuition tells you at times like this tends to be right.*

"I want you to be honest with me. Do you happen to know anything about what's happening?"

To sum it up...

The tree situation was Charlotte's fault.

In the past, when she had run for her life after the vampires attacked Huzak, her father had given her the Seed of a Hero, which had been passed down through generations of the royal family. However, just after she had slipped out of White Castle and entered the forest, she had dropped it. Thus, the biggest reason why she had wanted to go back there was to find and recover the Seed of a Hero.

It took a while before I could speak back up. "Sorry, Charlotte. Please pretend you never heard anything about a present from me."

"Um, wait, was the present you were talking about..."

"I thought...that the Seed of a Hero might have been left lying in the treasure room of White Castle. If it was, I wanted to give it to you. I heard from Elyas that you wanted your own wand, so... Ah, h-hey, Charlotte! Personal space!"

"Master Slowe, by that, you must mean... It's what I think it is, isn't it?! My own wand would mean that I have permission to use magic!"

Charlotte's face lit up like the sun, and she was just so *cute*! The circumstances that had led to House Denning barring her from having a wand had completely slipped my mind and I promised one to her.

"Yeah..." I muttered dejectedly. "After we return to Daryth, let's find a wand that's only for you."

What I didn't know was that this promise would end up triggering a gigantic problem later on.

"Ah! Elyas and the others are already so far away! Let's catch up!" I exclaimed.

We ran quickly towards the group of monsters with a great deal of effort. As we caught up, we saw monsters lined up on either side of the road, and they had appeared without us noticing.

Many eyes drilled into us at once. *Whoa, they're all looking at us. Is that because I'm the only orc? Being a famous guy's pretty tough.*

Compared to the monsters in the orc village, these ones obviously had a different air to them. The fact that their comrades had fallen was already common knowledge. Their bloodlust radiated off of them, almost as if they wanted to fight the demon immediately if it were at all possible.

Meanwhile, on the path that led to White Castle, I spotted a remarkably large monster. *So that's their boss, huh?* A demonic monster was the one who led these folks here. They were probably measuring the worth of Elyas and her group, judging whether there was any merit in joining hands with them.

There were only around a few hundred monsters here. In terms of pure numbers, the orc village significantly outnumbered them. However, in terms of individual power, the monsters here had the advantage.

"You've come a looong way, Elyasss. The spokesssperson of the Blue Light, the Demon King of the North," the demonic monster said in a somewhat distorted voice.

When Elyas finished talking with that demon, an all-out war between Rooney and the monsters of Huzak would probably begin.

If we had *this* many monsters, it was possible to recreate what

happened in the anime. *All that's left is...whether she'll trust me.*

I tried talking to her. “E-Elyas, uh, about what we were talking about earlier—” Her bodyguard glared at me. “Ah, it is nothing. I am very sorry.”

In the moments just after we made our departure, Elyas looked our way from time to time, but her mind seemed to be fully occupied with the discussion about the alliance now. Just how much did she remember about our conversation just before we left? I didn't know whether Elyas had believed what I had said in the first place.

“Charlotte, while Elyas's talking, we—”

Charlotte was staring ahead blankly.

“Ah,” I muttered. “I guess she's preoccupied too, huh?”



White Castle was her homeland. Even if she knew that her aim, the Seed of a Hero, wasn't there, she only had eyes for the area in front of her. *I guess that's to be expected. It's her childhood home, after all. She tried so hard all this time so that she could stand here today.*

While Elyas is talking about complicated stuff, I guess I'll journey out to make memories with Charlotte, who looks like she's itching to go.

I mean, I managed to make up with Charlotte, and we were also able to come here like this. I guess from what she said that the present I wanted to give her isn't here, but I don't need to rely on it anymore.

I thought that everything had been smooth sailing.

Until a very specific sound rang out.

Charlotte wasn't the only one who suddenly froze like a statue. The monsters who had been going ahead of us also stopped dead in their tracks.

It was a low-pitched sound, one that rumbled through the whole forest.

"This is..." I muttered.

The sound of a bell ringing traveled through the forest. I recognized it. *When have I heard that before?* Orcs had found a bell in an abandoned church and brought it back. When they had tested ringing it once, many monsters had made complaints against it, so Elyas had ordered that it must never be used again.

However, it was useful. We decided that it could be used as a signal when the human attacked.

And that bell was *ringing*, many times at that. Almost as if it were a plea for help. There was only one thing that could mean. *The orc village is under attack!*

And Elyas was the one who reacted faster than anyone else.

"Master Slowe, that sound just now was...! Is the orc village—"

"They aren't idiots! We told them very firmly to never ring it! And now they're doing it so much!" I paused. "Elyas, wait!"

The real pixie sprung up into the sky. She shot straight towards the heavens above, where the griffin was waiting. Elyas flew into the world of the azure skies, one that I couldn't reach.

The monsters of White Castle didn't understand what was going on, and they lost their composure, restless.

In the sky, Elyas was shouting angrily at the griffin, who was keeping a steady position in the sky in a composed manner.

I had never seen her like that before. Usually, she was perfectly calm and composed, never showing any hint of anxiety.

"But Master Slowe! Earlier, Eagle Eye said that the human was far away!"

"You can tell by looking at it! That damned bird deceived us!" I

hissed.

Elyas was ghastly pale, but the griffin did not even twitch.

The bell continued to ring and ring.

I didn't know what they were saying above us. *But Elyas...is going to leave.*

That was why I screamed towards the sky, in a loud voice that didn't fit the orc mage, who had a reputation for being calm and collected:

"Don't go, Elyas!!! We made a promise, didn't we?!"

I reached out my hand to the sky, but I could only grasp the air there. My fingertips were too far to catch anything.

The monsters that came from the orc village made their way back one after another. Chasing Elyas's trail, they retraced the path they came here on.

Finally, the monsters under the larger demonic one began to move too. They probably also realized that the orc village was attacked. However, these guys could do whatever they wanted. I didn't care.

But Elyas has...left.

"Master Slowe! Don't just stand there! If the orc village is under assault, then let's go back!"

"...It's useless. It's already too late."

"Why?!"

"We can't catch up to Elyas. There's no way we could. Pixies are fast when they're using their real strength."

"But if it's *you*, Master Slowe...!"

"...Pixies are monsters that managed to escape the pursuit of humans for many years. Once they're riding the wind, nobody can catch up."

Though we weren't able to exchange any words with each other...*she* had probably heard my voice. At the last moment, she had looked at us from up in the sky and seemed to whisper something. However, the tolling of the bell that had yet to stop ringing completely blocked out whatever she had said.

Use a spell to catch up to Elyas? It's no use. Using light magic to buff my speed somewhat wouldn't make up the difference between us while she's flying above.

I laughed. Oddly enough, I couldn't help but laugh.

The future was written in stone. Even though I had gathered that many monsters in the village, it had all been for naught. *In the end, I guess I must fight Rooney by myself.*

And then, a single monster came down from the sky, watching all this unfold with the cold eyes of a bystander. Despite being Elyas's bodyguard, this act seemed to declare that the situation didn't involve it at all... *I don't even have to think about it. This bird lied.*

Rooney had probably already been in the vicinity when we had left the orc village.

“Orc mage,” it addressed me. “Why are you laughing?”

“My bad, my bad. It’s just all so funny to me for some reason. All of my hard work just went poof, ya know? I really got hit hard.”

Because that’s how it is, isn’t it? In the end, I wasn’t able to save her.

“Eagle Eye. I thought that you had Elyas’s best interests at heart,” I said with an accusing tone.

“I prized Lady Elyas’s safety, and I did so more than anyone else. I attempted to persuade her plenty of times that we couldn’t beat the demon. However, Lady Elyas refused to listen. I thought that she’d obediently return to the north if the orc village was gone, but...who would have thought that she treasured the place so much? She is more headstrong than I thought.”

“Yeah. You monitored the demon the whole time, so you might not know this, but that village has a special place in Elyas’s heart. I dunno much myself, but she told me that with monsters, the different races didn’t usually get along, so that’s what made it special.”

At this rate, things were going to end up the same way they did in the anime. The fact that Shuya and Alicia were headed towards Zenelaus also added to that. *In the end...fate really won’t change, will it?*

I spotted Charlotte off to the side.

“I’m telling you to *wake up!* How long are you planning on sleeping?!” Charlotte yelled at the small creature.

She was desperately trying to wake the Great Spirit of Wind, who was fast asleep. *Oh, I see. If Altanger takes this seriously, then it might still be possible to save the orc village, even at this point.* Unfortunately, I knew just how difficult it was to convince the spirit to use their power.

There was one thing I didn’t understand, though. *She’s right before her childhood home, and yet...she’s trying to go back to the orc village. Why? Your real homeland is right there. Your goal is right before your eyes!*

“Jeez! You’re always sleeping! I’m going to punish you by making you skip meals from now on!”

And then, our eyes met. Her eyes were pleading with me, asking me whether I could do something about it all.

“Charlotte,” I said at length. “You’ve finally come back to your homeland. If you let this opportunity escape, then...I don’t know when you’ll have another.”

“I can come back here at any time. Even if it changes a bit, it’s always here. But...I haven’t even said thank you to Miss Elyas for becoming friends with me yet.”

...Pathetic.

Charlotte hadn't given up yet.

I'm pathetic.

I was so worthless that I wanted to sigh.

Why did I even come to Huzak? Why did I go so far as to borrow the power of No Face and even change my appearance into a monster?

Was it to change the future? Well, that's obvious. I don't want that shoddy future.

I'll definitely change that. I must. But is that all?

...No. I think...

I probably wanted to save her. Elyas.

"Orc mage, this was the last order from Lady Elyas," the griffin said.

In the anime, she threw away her own life to let those two escape. So this time, it's my turn to save her.

"I'll help you two escape to Daryth. Get on my back."

Even though her homeland was right before her, Charlotte wished to save Elyas, and to save the orc village.

What a coincidence. I had the exact same idea.

Plus, I hadn't even heard what Elyas had tried to tell me in those last moments. Thus...

"Hey, Eagle Eye," I muttered. "I'm talking about you. Your stupid move right there just sabotaged everything."

The enormous monster before my eyes was Eagle Eye. It was the trusted confidant of the pixie hero of the north, the Untouchable Blue Light, and she had assigned it to act as her sister's bodyguard. The Demon King of the North, who had despaired over her kin being killed in the future I knew.

"Bring me to the orc village," I ordered Eagle Eye. "I'll forgive everything if you do that."

The problem was simple. If Elyas went, that meant I could just catch up to her. I wouldn't make it in time with my abilities, but in that case, I could just ask someone to help.

Right now, the village was probably receiving devastating losses. However, this was the precise time when I must return my debt to them.

If Charlotte and I had stayed in the capital of Daryth, we definitely wouldn't have been able to reconcile. *I think that we were only able to make up because we met everyone in this special world full of monsters, and that's why, I...*

"You dull-witted orc mage..." the griffin muttered. "I already said that it's all over."

"You're the one who's dull-witted. I'm saying that I'm going to

save the orc village and Elyas, all of them!”

“What can *you* do? That human is on a whole other level from a hydra. A mere orc—”

“How pathetic. Just because you failed at your ambush once... Ah, I see. So that’s how it is. Because the monsters put a coward like you onto such a high position on the ladder, you guys aren’t able to even snatch a sliver of territory from the Dustour Empire. But you can rest at peace now. In the place of someone like you, who always runs away with your tail between your legs, *I* will handle that demon, Eagle Eye.”

“Don’t be so full of yourself, orc mage,” the griffin snarled. “The human won’t do it, so I’ll be the one to tear you into shreds right h—”

My anger got to my head, and some of my true colors slipped. “Hey. What did you just say? *Who* will kill *whom*?”

Eagle Eye flaunted its sharp talons, edging back and preparing to take flight with a flap of its wings.

Just before it could, I forcefully tied it to the ground with magic.

“You filth! Like I thought, you’re not an orc at all!!!” the griffin spat.

“Huh? Didn’t I mention this?”

Even right at this moment, I could hear the sound that announced the outbreak of war. Wanting to get a clearer picture of what was going on from the heights of White Castle, the large demonic monster roared and *changed its appearance*, kicking off the ground in our direction.

Enough.

I’m at my limit.

Stop complicating things further.

“I’m the human from Daryth who took down the black dragon, Daryth’s Dragon Slayer.”

That was why...without thinking, those unexpected words spilled from my mouth.

Chapter 4: Changing Fate

“That guy’s the demon who steals light, oiiiink!!!!!!”

“Which idiot was the one who said that we could defeat him if we all combined our powers, oink?!”

A “demon.” That was what the orcs called the slaughterer who had appeared out of nowhere in Huzak.

He harmed his fellow man and was a harbinger of death and darkness who was likely to attack the orc village one day. The village had been ready for such a day, for when the man would come and tear apart any order there was. They made the most flawless preparations they could, or so they had thought. They purposefully set it up so that the battle would be one human versus a giant army, and their overwhelming advantage in numbers would leave them standing strong.

However, the stench of blood permeated the area. Monsters wore twisted expressions of anger and fear as they confronted unavoidable, certain defeat.

“Slobe! Where did you go?! Save us, oink!”

“Slobe went to White Castle! Lady Elyas and the others will surely soon bring the demonic monster in charge there back here with them, oink!”

As the man watched the orcs scramble for escape, he thought back to the aim of his expedition.

The order which Nanatrij had given him was to determine the power of the south. It was going to be the determining factor for whether or not she would start a war with them and she declared that she would heavily lean on the opinion of a single man.

As for how the man met that fickle girl... It all started on a certain day.

Back at that exact moment when he had tried to assassinate the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij, and had his life spared on a whim.

“Wow, that surprised me. How long has it been since someone aimed for my life in broad daylight like this? A few decades? You’re pretty skilled, but you should really be more careful about whom you target... Why do you look as if the apocalypse is going to happen? Come on, just leave. Shoo, you’re in the way... You want me to kill you? Are you suicidal or something? Listen here, someone showing up trying to kill me is trivial to me. I don’t care at all. Just how many humans...ah, I guess monsters and

elves too, do you think have tried to kill me? But, well... True, even one failure at your job would mean that your existence is worthless. Then...do you want to come with me?"

She had said it was a spur-of-the-moment decision. This had irritated the man and he felt like she was messing with him, but he had nowhere to go. He didn't have anything else to do back then, so he had dealt with the various plots that tried to kill her. That became a trend, and before he knew it, he'd been given a post in the army.

By the fickle girl's own discretion, he became a soldier. He had been reluctant since this was the *Dustour Empire* they were talking about, but he'd also thought that this was a chance to be closer to her. The man had already taken an interest in the girl, and those Three Musketeers had sworn fealty to her as well.

He'd wanted to know the reason why she, a Master of Wandless Spells, had chosen to live on. Hardening his resolve, he'd asked her that once, and she replied easily.

He'd laughed at her answer, calling her a fool.

However, at the same time, he'd also thought her ideas were noble. Indeed, her dream was a pie in the sky for a human, so he could easily understand the reason she chose to stop being one.

"I want to establish a free country in the north where nobody can interfere with my goals. And it's my chance right now. Real heroes, only seen once in a generation at best, have appeared in the empire, and not one, but three of them at that! I'm prepared to make sacrifices for the union of the continent, but I'd hate to walk into a swamp full of obstacles and find myself at a standstill. So, Rooney, probe them for me. I don't care how. Whether we should start a war with the south or not... I'll give you the full authority for that decision."

He had even begun to feel ecstatic at the level of trust Nanatrij had bestowed upon him. It was the first time that she had ever given him such an important mission. *In the past, I was an assassin who sought her death. Yet now, I'm an undeniable fanatic.*

At first, he had chuckled, and it grew into a roar of laughter. "To think that I, of all people, would live for someone else!"

With a sickening leer on his face, he had walked forward into this battlefield, one which most adventurers would likely shrink away from.

Even though he was one single human, *he* was the one who controlled the scene.

A typical adventurer would probably hesitate to walk in this battleground. However, this man didn't stop.

An orc shrieked. "Why are you laughing?! I'm an Orc King! I'm a cut above the orcs that you norma— Ooiink!!!!!"

The orc in question was an adult who was noticeably larger than

the rest, and it had the symbol of the king species tattooed on the left of its chest.

“Ah! He sent Oinkus flying! Weakling!” a monster roared.

There were no monsters left that could meet the man’s gaze. They had already lost their will to fight.

“Ooioi’s not hurt, but he fainted from fear! Someone help, oink!”

“This guy’s heavy, oink.”

Another orc snorted in agreement.

The great number of orcs gathered in the village were the first ones to be trampled on.

But that was to be expected. No matter how much they evolved, orcs were the smallest of small fries, at the bottom of the monster food chain. They were so weak that they were like slugs that would be sent flying by a flick to the forehead from an ogre.

Orcs often found themselves groaning from stomach pain after picking up meat from the ground and eating it without a second thought. If anyone dug a pitfall, they would definitely fall in, and they would never fail to find themselves ensnared in any kind of trap. In other words, they were completely foolish monsters.

That was all the more reason why the Orc King, who only had his cheerfulness going for him, wanted to become stronger than anyone else.

“It huuurts. I want Slobe to cast *Heal* on me, oink...” he muttered.

In this world, there were the strong, and then there were the weak. Orcs were clearly the latter, the lowest of the low.

The orcs lived in fear of those with power, and because of that, it was unthinkable for them to settle down in one place. That was why the creation of a peaceful village like the orc village had been a miracle to Oinkus.

Every day had been full of joy, and he had his fill of peaceful times. However, it was time for that miraculous time to end.

It was all over. The orc village would be destroyed today.

The man’s tone was mocking. “Orc King. I will now destroy everything that you monsters have built up from the ground—”

Oinkus was a foolish Orc King, but he desperately wrung his brain for ideas. However, he couldn’t think of anything.

Elyas had said that if the demon appeared, there was a high chance that they would have to abandon the orc village. She had told him to brace himself for the worst possibility.

There’s no way I’d let anyone break the kingdom we built, the young Orc King had thought as anger took over. He could just attack the demon first. Thus, Oinkus headed towards the demon all by himself, and...he came back running. With just one look, he realized that he couldn’t win against *that thing*.

That was why he gathered more to come with him. If he had more comrades, there might be a slim shred of possibility of winning. There may have been a chance that he might not have to throw away the orc village.

However, Oinkus bit down hard on his lip as his vision was blotted with the darkness of despair.

“I’ll tell you one last thing. In truth, I had planned on killing the demonic leader of White Castle first. However, this village became too big to ignore. I couldn’t let this go on any longer.”

Lady Elyas, that awful griffin, and even Slobe went to White Castle. They’ll probably be sad if they found the orc village gone after they come back.

Fearsome darkness began to wrap around Oinkus’s body as he lay on the ground. He was probably only still alive thanks to his tough body as the Orc King.

The man was approaching.

Even though it was noon, Oinkus could only see a world that was dark like the night before him, and the demon was closing in to deal the final blow.

“I don’t want to die.” Oinkus wailed. “I don’t wanna, oiiink.” He coughed in pain.

“As I thought, the monsters led by the Blue Light are completely different from you bunch. Did you think you could live a happy life if you ran away from the north? You can’t even hope to match the vampire clan that destroyed Huzak in the first place. If I had known you were this weak, I wouldn’t have even *needed* to crush you.”

Oinkus coughed and hacked pitifully.

However, in his few remaining moments, the thoughts on the young Orc King’s mind happened to be silly, trifling things that went way beyond the man’s expectations.

I’m hungry because I moved around a lot. Which reminds me, I left some food just waiting there. How many times will Slobe ask for seconds today? Will the weather be clear tomorrow? I would hate for there to be rain. Is that cat going to make a fuss again tonight?

“So this is the downfall of more than a thousand orcs, and even an Orc King that managed to command other species as well.”

These thoughts were way too silly for someone on the brink of death. But all that came to his mind were trivial, everyday things.

The orc village still has room to grow. I wanted to make lots of shops like human countries. In that case, what kind of monster should I assign to run weapon shops? An orc weapon shop seems weak, so I don’t want that. That’s right, I guess I’ll ask a golem. For the item shop, hmm... Yeah, orcs don’t fit that either, oink. In that case, I must live at least for another few decades. I don’t wanna die. I still wanna live.

Despite his barrage of thoughts, no words would leave the Orc King's mouth.

"So you've even given up on living, huh?"

The Orc King's desire to live swelled without limit. His sadness wouldn't stop, and neither did his complaints.

Like the punch line of a cruel joke, when Oinkus opened his mouth wide, a black *something* flowed in and he started to choke. And that darkness, which beckoned to death, was only driven away by the pain of being no longer able to breathe.

But then there was *wind*. A gust of wind blew away the darkness surrounding the Orc King's body.

Surprised, Oinkus lifted his head. "Oink?"

"Don't 'oink' me. Do you know just how noisy you were? Your screams were really shaking everyone up! You were way more than just a nuisance to your neighbors, you hear me?"

A barrier of wind, which seemed so fragile compared to the man's darkness spell, was protecting Oinkus...and the girl who cast the spell in the first place. Shocked, Oinkus couldn't even speak. It was because the voice was a monster that Oinkus knew very, very well.

It was the pixie who loved gossiping. She was a monster who led a life far away from strength, battles, and all that rowdy stuff. Oinkus knew that very well too.

"Don't!!!" Oinkus wailed, choking as he spoke. "You're weaker than me, Lady Elyas! Oink!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

"So you're the pixie who had run from place to place trying to escape from me, yeah? *Surely* you didn't think you had a chance of winning if you gathered the ogres which occupy White Castle?"

"Oh dear," the pixie began slowly. "They are strong, you know? After all—"

"Don't look down on me. The ogres that destroyed the vampire with the Blue Light aren't around, not even a single one of them. Those ogres in White Castles are all failures. They don't even have horns."

The darkness emitting from the man swirled and mixed with Elyas's wind barrier. Unfortunately, the wind barrier didn't seem like it could endure it for much longer, and just one look at Elyas's face twisting in chagrin was enough to show the clear power gap between the two.

Elyas hardened her resolve as she did her best to keep up the barrier. Behind her was Oinkus, more dead than not. Her wind barrier seemed like it could give out at any moment, but there was no way she could run and leave the stupid Orc King coughing up smoke lying there.

This man is a demon, she thought. Even though he was just a

human, she felt her whole body tremble like a leaf in the breeze. Even though he was outnumbered vastly by the surrounding monsters, the possibility of his own defeat didn't even seem to cross his mind.

This human's power was at a level where she could never reach. In terms of ability, he was close to the realm of the Three Musketeers, who were so powerful that even the Demon King of the North was said to have her hands full keeping them at bay. Elyas didn't know why such a powerful person was in Huzak, but since he *was* here, he was her problem now.

If she didn't want to die, her only choice was to fight back with all she had.

Beads of sweat slid down from her forehead. Perhaps because she was fueling everything into her spell, her stamina was depleting at a shocking rate. She could already start to feel her limit approaching.

Elyas gritted her teeth.

If her barrier fell, she'd probably be finished in an instant. She didn't have a sturdy body like the Orc King to protect her. The heat of the man's spell blazed with more fervor. Her two outstretched arms that held up the barrier were already starting to feel weak. Elyas slowly closed her eyes, bracing herself for her very last moment.

The man's darkness was so powerful that it could deplete the mana reserves of someone like Elyas in no time at all. She gradually lost feeling in her two hands that stopped the blow, and she was almost entirely paralyzed now. Her mana could dry up and the barrier could fall at any moment. The wind barrier, which was probably still upheld before her right now, was surely becoming very thin and undependable.

She hesitated to open her eyes. Elyas kept them shut tight as she waited for the end to come.

However, no matter how long she waited, the darkness never scalded her body.

"...Huh?" Elyas let out.

The spell had been called off.

Not only that, but the bloodlust aimed towards Elyas and Oinkus had also disappeared.

Nervously, Elyas turned to look at the place she last saw the man and she finally realized what had happened.

That terrifying man no longer even looked at them, almost as if a mere Orc King and pixie were now beneath his attention.

"What a surprise. Why did you come back? I remember telling you that there wouldn't be a second time!" the man shouted.

The man fixed his eyes on a boy with crimson hair like flames, and a savage grin formed on the man's sharp features.

The man couldn't help but find it all so *hilarious*. Someone who

wasn't supposed to be there had shown up. How could he resist laughing? After all...

The Daryth noble, whom the man clearly remembered beating into a pulp one night, charged at him once again.

The monsters had been crushed one-sidedly by the man and didn't know anything about the boy who approached the demon. They didn't know why these humans were fighting amongst themselves.

"I *told* you, Shuya, that you shouldn't be a slave to your magic. I also told you how to figure out when you're out of your depth. Shuya, your power is far inferior to mine, but you had the sprout of potential within. I could see a chance of exponential growth in you, so I spared you. Don't you think you should use your precious second life more wisely?!"

"Shut up!" Shuya hissed. "I'm going to drag you back to the guild! I swear it!"

"You're just an insignificant kid without power, without knowledge, without comrades! What can *you* do?!"

"Shut uuup!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The man dealt with the young fire mage as if it were a game. Their difference in power was obvious.

However, Shuya had a reason why he couldn't let it all end yet.

On that night, Shuya had realized the truth. The man who had saved him, the man whom he had admired, was actually a mass murderer. He couldn't believe it. He didn't *want* to believe it. However, the man recited everything he had done in Huzak for Shuya to hear and announced that *he* had been the one who was killing the soldiers and adventurers in this country.

"You should thank the fact that you were born in the south because men like you are the first to die in the north. You should have used the life I saved to head to Zenelaus obediently and get more powerful there! And what about that girl? Did you leave her somewhere to die?!"

"That has nothing to do with you!" Shuya yelled.

On that night, Shuya had been beaten up but was spared. The man hadn't taken his life, and Shuya had run away with Alicia. However, in the middle of their journey to the Freedom Union, they saw many corpses along the way. The adventurers that lay there had all accepted the special quest in Zenelaus and attacked the man, leading to their deaths. The magical parchment Shuya had found had listed the numerous, uncountable crimes of the man.

Shuya couldn't just walk on towards Zenelaus with his mouth closed, ears shut, and eyes looking away from reality. There was no way he could.

And on top of that, though he didn't have any evidence to back it up...

The current-day Denning wouldn't pretend he saw nothing if he were in Shuya's shoes right now either.

"What are you spacing out for, Oinkus? Let's run to a safe place while we have the chance." Elyas paused. "Oinkus, what are you looking at?"

"Lady Elyas, that human... He's crazy. He's way too tough, oink..."

Just like the Orc King said, the scene before them was abnormal.

No matter how many times the red-haired boy was knocked down, he still got back up. It was almost as if he was declaring that he wouldn't die unless someone broke his spirit.

The man hesitated. "Shuya. You... Aren't you in pain right now?"

"I won't forgive you. I definitely won't forgive you..." Shuya muttered deliriously. "How dare you deceive me... *I trusted you...*"

"You aren't making sense... *You're* the one who went to be deceived of your own accord."

However, a wave of unease washed over the man's heart.

Rooney had immediately realized that something was off with Shuya. Shuya's spells were *too* skilled and fluid. *And just now, Shuya...looked like he moved in a way that's impossible for a human,* Rooney thought. *Not only that, I can't even see his lips moving to chant the incantations for spells.*

"Even still, Shuya... I don't even have to use magic to deal with the weakling you currently are." Shuya was still clearly outclassed. Rooney seized Shuya by the hair as the boy came close and then slammed the boy's body hard against the ground. "I take back what I said earlier. I said that there wouldn't be a second time, but I'll make an exception."

The man had a bad habit of letting promising youths run free, but he had never let the same human off twice. However, Shuya today was almost like a stranger compared to a few days ago.

The boy lunged at him repeatedly like a starved beast. It was easy for Rooney to guess that the boy had been bound by some kind of compulsion. Rooney forced the berserk Shuya into unconsciousness and took a breather himself.

"If you manage to survive this lair of monsters, that is," Rooney muttered. "However, that girl wouldn't have left you behind either. If you two work together, you might still be able to escape from this battlefield."

However, Rooney's verdict that the union of the continent would be a swift endeavor was unchanged. They didn't need the power of the Three Musketeers, who were busy with the elves. Taking on the continent with the spare might of the empire was more than enough.

A sense of accomplishment filled him. It had been a long mission.

He had stayed in hiding in this country for several months, all by himself. Moreover, since his real identity was starting to be exposed, it was about time to retreat. He had learned enough about the average power of soldiers in the south. If this was all they had, then there wasn't a need for Nanatrij nor the Three Musketeers' powers to take over the area. He would end this by annihilating these monsters and returning to the empire, thus completing his operation.

"...Hm?" He had been too focused on his fight with Shuya and had been negligent about being vigilant of his surroundings.

Something was out of place. Something was off. And then, he realized what it was.

All those defeated monsters that had been terrified of his power were returning. One after another, the number of monsters continued to increase.

"What, is the circus coming into town? Did you think the likes of you Huzak monsters could win against me as long as there's enough of you? Did you find an ogre with a horn or a surviving vampire in White Castle? Or maybe you managed to find and bring a headless dullahan who lost its lord?" Rooney sneered. "I let this human off the hook because he has talent. However, it's a different case for all of you."

He felt annoyance grow within him. *Why aren't they running?* He was sure he had instilled fear in them. Weaklings should just act like the weaklings they were.

Right at that moment, the crowded rows of monsters shifted, parting of their own accord to make a path.

The man wondered what kind of big shot would appear at the end of the path. He assumed it would be the demonic leader from White Castle, but the scene made him question his own eyes.

"Who would have thought that of all people, it would be the great anime protagonist who helped to buy time...?"

An orc. A completely ordinary orc approached him from the sea of monsters.

If the man had to pick one defining characteristic about the orc, it was the fact that it was chubby. An orc with a potbelly held a thick twig— No, wait, that thing was a wand. The orc tightly gripped a *mage wand* and approached the man.

So the rumored orc mage finally appears. I see. But...what in the world is this?

"Slobe! Yer late, oink!"

"Make that human go somewhere else! He's way too scary, oink!"

The orc village is becoming much more hopeful.

Even though I, the person who caused this terrible scene, am right in front of them, ordinary orcs are approaching without fear overtaking them.

It's not like the situation has changed at all. However, clearly, the atmosphere changed after that thing appeared.

The orc spoke. "It seems like you had lots of fun, but have you ever heard of picking on someone your own size?"

The monsters all cheered excitedly in agreement, and the man felt his forehead twitch.

"...More importantly, Elyas! Leaving me behind like that was mean. Did you doubt what I said to you before we went to White Castle?"

"Slobe, how did you...?"

"Your bodyguard is more faithful to its duties than I thought. It gave in once I talked to it."

"Wait, you don't mean...!"

Elyas looked up into the sky and was taken over by shock. Eagle Eye, who had supposedly forsaken the orc village, was there overhead. And looking awkward, at that.

"Oops. Elyas, seems like the demon is about to flip out because we left him out of the loop for too long. You can just wait there until it's your turn. Remember what I said before? Defeating that human is *my* role, you see."

Now then, it was time to raise the curtains.

Of course, the boy couldn't say that everything had gone according to his plans—not at all, in fact, but... The preparations to change the future were now all set.

"...I suppose I should say, nice to meet you?" the boy mused.

All of his outrageous hardships until this point had led to this one moment.

Did that orc just say that it would defeat me?

"I feel as if my entire life has just been spat on," the man muttered.

The orc was short in stature and was a mere shadow compared to the Orc King. *So that's the orc mage that the monsters have been spreading rumors about. It seems pretty calm, but that's all there is to it.*

However, the man didn't know that under the surface, the boy was actually a little moved by this meeting with Rooney Blough. Though the man had been a villain in the anime, this charismatic, attractive man had been a vital part of Shuya's growth.

"A mere orc, saying he'll defeat *me*? How amusing. I'll let you have the first mo—"

"Oh, gladly—"

Together with words from a quiet voice, something aimed towards

the man and passed right by him.

Moving quickly, the man had evaded it, but a prickle of pain brushed the man's cheek. Something dripped onto the ground. He immediately realized what it was. It was his own blood, which he hadn't had many chances to see in some time.

In other words, the orc had attacked him and nearly landed a blow.

The moment Rooney came to that realization, a burst of heat spread through his entire body.

An orc? An orc? Orcs were beneath my attention even back when I was just a novice adventurer. That pig caused an injury? To whom? To me? The one trying to challenge the Three Musketeers? The one whom the Great Spirit of Darkness trusts immensely?

"I will slaughter all of you," the man swore slowly, dragging out each syllable.

This was the first time the man's blood had been shed since he had infiltrated Huzak, and it was enough to make him take things seriously.

A swing of a knife from a long distance. One hit should have been enough to end it all. It was a combined spell of fire, darkness, and wind. The orc received a blow from the invisible blade, and—

It still stood there, as if nothing happened.

Did it manage to defend itself against my spell? However, the man then noticed that his spell hadn't gone off at all. Why? His right hand holding the knife, which was one movement short of the trigger spell, hadn't swung down. It's bound to the space around it. No. Not just my arm. My legs, my mouth... I couldn't move a muscle. That orc mage attacked faster than I could! But the magic items I'm wearing should have deflected any mere spell an experienced mage can cast!

"Slaughter all of us? How?"

After receiving the attack, the man understood. *That orc is in a completely different league from the pixie. In that case—*

"I'll...do this!" the man exclaimed.

Mustering up his strength, he twisted the magic to its breaking point...but it wouldn't budge. At that realization, he shuddered in fear. *Just how much mana did that orc use? That was just the first blow!*

"Fascinating!" the man yelled. His next blow was to send a wave of destruction with a dual-element spell of wind and darkness, which he hadn't named. The orc's spell, missing its target, blew away a house. The other monsters screamed in surprise.

"Don't tell me...that's all you've got?" the orc muttered.

"Don't you worry! I haven't even used half of my strength!"

The man decided that he would need to break through from one point. The momentum was already beginning to shift in the orc mage's

favor. He had to change the atmosphere hanging over the battle. *If this many monsters are riled up with hope and charge, it would be a sticky situation, even for me.* He had to defeat the orc mage, who was the driving force behind all of this. His course of action decided, the man took the initiative and made his move.

Invisible blades of wind came flying down from above the man. *Abbreviating his incantation, I see.* An injury couldn't be avoided. However, the only thing to do was to travel the shortest path to his goal.

Still, not bad at all, this orc variant. Its power as a mage... It compares to the lich guards of the Ghost King, the half-human, half-fiend member of the Three Musketeers... The orc mage's power even reminded the man of that other pixie, the Demon King of the North.

He would break through the tempest of light even if it meant getting hit in the process. Tearing it all into pieces with his knife, he carved a path that would lead him straight to the orc.

It seemed that the farther he advanced, the thicker the magic became. A sturdy defense was the sign of a mage that was poor at close-ranged combat. *Like I thought...I must close the gap between us.*

"I can see your panic, orc mage!" he yelled.

The man had absolute confidence in winning combat in close quarters. When he had fought a match against the half-fiend Ghost King, the man had managed to take down two of his liches. The power of the mere orc mage couldn't even hold a candle to his own.

The blades hailed down from above like rain. The downpour of projectiles was like a relentless storm. Rooney's mind was about to go crazy from the pain and effort of trying to avoid as many as he could.

Still, the man took pride in his abilities and the fact that he had overcome many experiences that nearly led to his end.

There were now only ten steps between the orc and him. He kicked the ground hard, and—

"I've got yo—" And immediately, something felt *wrong*. "What?!" The man gasped. "Don't tell me... You bastard!"

The man's face twisted until there was no way it could warp any further. Just now, he saw something he couldn't believe.

However, he'd had underlying doubts about his opponent from the beginning.

In the first place, he had never heard of an orc that could use magic. On top of that, for an orc, its attacks were too intelligent. Even now, Rooney's potential escape paths were being cut off one after another. If he gave up on piercing through and fell back, he knew that a serious blow was waiting for him. Despite being a mere orc, it was able to read two, no, three steps ahead. The fact that it had been able to use a spell strong enough to fix him in place only added to that

oddity.

However, the deciding factor was the ring. The man couldn't tear his eyes away from the black ring on the orc mage's left index finger.

"The Galalion?!" he hissed, incredulous.

Thus, the man suspended his offense and jumped aside. He used his full strength to guard against the furious attack of the wind that repeatedly pounded at him. Using a darkness spell, he negated it.

His pulse jumped, his heart pounding audibly in his chest, and he used everything he had to try to piece together the truth in front of him.

"Why? Why?! *Why?!*" *That shape...* There was no way he could mistake it.

Regaining his breath, the man roared. "Orc mage, where did you obtain that ring?! That was the last piece I had searched for! The magical artifact that Lady Nanatrij had once lent to a Daryth noble with extraordinary talent!"

The man was directly under the command of the Great Spirit, and he gladly retrieved magical artifacts she had once crafted if she wished for their return.

There were three such magical artifacts scattered around the world. They were the relics she had created back when she had been a pure pursuer of magic and nothing more. However, he could never find the last one.

I have searched long and hard for it. There's no way in hell I could mistake it for something else!

"Why are you able to master it, you swine?! That thing's— Damn it, shut up, you stupid monsters! Do you trash understand what this means?! The ring on that orc mage's hand, created by Lady Nanatrij, houses the power of transformation! Are you all too blinded by your faith in this orc mage to see its real identity?!"

"As expected, when I'm in this body, the spirits don't recognize me," the orc mage muttered. "Sorry, Oinkus. But I didn't lie, ya know? I told you from the very beginning that I only came here to defeat the demon."

Alarm bells rang in Rooney's mind. He was opposing someone he couldn't understand. It was an abnormal caution that had also gone off when he had once clashed with the Three Musketeers.

He couldn't understand his opponent's motive, and an uncomfortable feeling overtook his heart. *That orc is a human.*

The next move that the orc mage made was completely unexpected.

The ring the orc mage wore began to shine. A black mist suddenly appeared, one that shared the same nature as the darkness born from the man's knife. The orc mage was enveloped in it, and in the next

moment...

"Transformation Release."

This human, who had disguised himself as an orc, had managed to gain many monsters as his allies.

The man had thought that the human wouldn't throw away that advantage. After all, Rooney was a formidable opponent. He had that self-awareness and the track record to back it up. *Against someone like me, it's more reassuring to have them as allies, even if they are monsters.*

Therefore, who in the world could have considered the possibility that the orc mage would *voluntarily* change back into the form of a human?

There was silence in the village.

As the mist dissipated, a human was left standing in the orc mage's place.



Not only that, but the human even seemed like he was around the same age as the red-haired Shuya whom the man had been with for a few days.

The monsters, who had fervently cheered for the orc mage, were also at a loss for words.

Without a moment's delay, the boy took off his magic cloak and waved his wand once again. A muddy stream of earth ran amok and the ground writhed, trying to entangle the man. This wasn't an exaggeration: the ground was indeed shaking.

The man also recognized that the display of power in the battle had moved up a gear. The trade of blows and defense of the two were now reaching otherworldly territory.

However, the ones that were most surprised were the orcs. After all, the orc mage had turned into a human!

"Slobe became a human, oink?"

"Oink?"

"What is that, oink?"

"Slobe! Gramps fell over and got injured!" The orc paused. "Ah wait, he was a human, oink."

They had been deceived. Without realizing it, they had let a human into the fold.

However, at a time like this, the only thing that mattered to these orcs was whether the human was an enemy or an ally. There were a lot of monsters from other races who were still grappling with that fact, but orcs were simpleminded through thick and thin.

"Won't you hurry up and defeat the demon, oink?!"

"Hurry up and beat him, oink!"

He had claimed he came to defeat the demon, and that clearly hadn't been a lie.

If he truly did come to defeat the demon, then how was there any problem with all this?

After all, the orc village had accepted many monsters from all kinds of races. *Wouldn't it be fine for there to be one human at least?* or so they thought. The orcs continued to cheer on the orc mage and were so happy-go-lucky that the other monsters were exasperated.

"...I-I noticed from the beginning though, oink."

The Orc King's moment of sour grapes was drowned out by the voices of the orcs rising in excitement once again.



What? Are you serious?! He managed to dodge that spell?! What kind of crazy reflexes does he have?!

"Losing is unforgivable, oink!"

“Slobe! Drive that demon away, oink!”

Ugh, you're all so loud!

Do y'all know how strong that guy is?! This is an event that's obviously set up for me to lose! I'm nearly using my full power! Damn it, if I put everything into evading, I won't be able to hit him!

I sighed inwardly. *Yeah, this is definitely an event with a predetermined fate. There's no way Shuya could win against such a strong guy in the first twelve episodes of the anime!*

“Aren't you that bothered by the fact that you borrowed my lady's power and deceived the monsters?” the man asked.

“Nope, not really. I just thought that the orcs are especially noisy.”

On the sidelines, monsters were making a racket, and orcs were the loudest of the lot as they snorted. *Huh. It's kind of a weird sight to see that many giant monsters being so scared of a single human.*

But are you all really okay with this? I deceived you guys, you know? You're still going to cheer for me? I am a human! I duped you!

Haaah... If you're all going to act like that, I guess that means I must win against this guy, no matter what.

I noticed that Rooney wasn't dressed in the military uniform I usually associated him with. *I see. During this period, he even changed his clothing so that his identity as a soldier wouldn't be revealed. He's a tough opponent without oversight.*

However, this guy... He hasn't abandoned his humanity as much as the Three Musketeers yet.

“That crest on your wand... It seems familiar, but I guess I can just force you to spill the information later.”

“Or can you? You're just a depraved guy who has fun bullying orcs,” I taunted back at him.

I still can't imagine it, though...

Maybe it's because we're an equal match for each other at the moment, but I can't see a future where I crush this guy one-sidedly.

“You're nauseating. I can't read your mind at all. How did you learn to hide your emotions at such an age?”

“My family background is rather unique, you see. Even in my earliest memories, they hammered methods of controlling emotions into me. That doesn't mean what I'm showing you is my real self, though. More importantly, hey! It's about time we end this, don't you think?”

All of a sudden, I found Shuya's crumpled form at my feet. *I really can't predict what this guy does... Jeez, my plans were all ruined due to you! Plus, after I defeat Rooney, I also need to go find Alicia. I bet she's probably hiding somewhere.*

“It's a travesty for me to share the same opinion as a depraved guy

who disguised himself as an orc, but indeed. Let's end this," declared Rooney.

...So it's finally going to come to this. It's my first time experiencing that spell firsthand. Now then, it's the start of crunch time.

"Would you be able to stay standing in the *Darkness*, I wonder?"

What happened next reminded me of those times when your television screen suddenly turns black with a flash.

Without warning, my world was dyed pitch black.

I couldn't see anything, hear anything, or feel anything.

The light was gone.

So *this* was the power of the demon that the orcs feared: the power to steal light.

There wasn't anything other than the man's voice.

"It's difficult for me to expand this darkness over such a broad area, but it seems that at least this much is necessary to kill you."

I had braced myself for this, but it still caught me off guard for a moment. *Now that I've experienced this for myself... Jeez, this spell is nuts.*

First, the light was gone, and all sounds went with it. My sense of orientation was the next to go, and it was even enough to make me mistakenly think I had died for a moment. Normally, if someone was unable to see, they would rely on what they could hear to decide on their next action. However, even sound was completely absent. Only that demon's voice remained.

I see. He is indeed the demon that steals light.

"You, mage, whose name I don't even know," Rooney addressed me. "The fact that you were able to draw out the ring's power means that you probably had something you *must* accomplish, even if it meant disguising your appearance."

Despite my completely powerless state, I could still hear his voice. *You're a scary guy, Rooney. I get why the Great Spirit of Darkness took a liking to someone like you.*

You can't lose. There's no way you would.

This spell, Darkness. This is a spell that can mean certain death, and it's one that even I can't copy.

The monsters are probably in a huge panic right now.

But I do know something, Rooney. Under these circumstances... You can't use magic either.

Not only that, this darkness is an absolute power that you use when you want to make sure you succeed at your mission without fail. The fact that you chose to rely on this special power is absolute proof that you've changed your target.

Your loyalty to Nanatrij... I'll take advantage of it.

Rooney could tell the boy's skills were at the top tier.

Though he was still green, he didn't let his talent get to his head. He understood his own weaknesses. The boy wasn't a warrior. Unlike Shuya, he didn't aim so high on his quest for strength that would melt his wings of wax. If Rooney had to choose, this boy was probably more inclined towards being a commander. And if this battle dragged on, Rooney knew that his own victory would be set in stone.

However, Rooney purposefully chose to use this spell.

I just don't understand. This thought echoed in his mind.

This boy has obviously been waiting for me. His camouflage as a monster wasn't a fleeting fancy, but rather, part of his plans. Judging by the enormous amount of trust the monsters had in him, he probably kept up the charade for many days. Any normal human's spirit wouldn't last that long.

The more Rooney thought about it, the sharper the chill up his spine seemed to bite. It was an icy dread, as if he had landed right into his enemy's trap.

That was why Rooney decided to use this spell to finish the boy off.

"I can't see anything, oink."

Another orc snorted out a question. "Very scary. Where did everyone go, oink?"

Using *Darkness* meant that Rooney could easily pick off people who were thorns in his side and slaughter them one after another.

This man was the assassin who terrified the north. If this man wanted to, wouldn't he be able to even sneak into the emperor's bedchamber? That was the type of rumor that followed him.

Failure was a word that just couldn't be associated with him. The only blemish on his perfect record was when he had met the Great Spirit of Darkness—his only failed assassination attempt.

He had been shaken to the core that day. He had known that it was finally his turn to die. However, the girl had instead told and taught him her noble duty. *She asked for a filthy, foul human like me. Before I knew it, I began using my power for her sake.*

"Ah, I just hit someone's arm. Is someone there, oink?"

"I'm scared so I'll squat down here. I don't wanna move, oink."

Under Nanatrij's wing, the man had taken his *Darkness* spell to further heights. In here, the wind gave him a heightened sense of hearing, which only he was able to use. He listened to the way they all breathed and moved, matching it up thoroughly with the information he had memorized about his opponents. Even while he had been fighting, he had been paying careful attention to his surroundings.

Failure is impossible.

That boy will definitely be a wall standing in the empire's way. I should kill him without fail here. However...

While the man slipped through the gaps between the monsters, he let his thoughts wander. The boy's presence had disappeared. Perhaps he had somehow blended in with the darkness. *He really is a strenuous opponent. A boy with that much power means that his name must be just as widespread. And he's still young, at that.* From experience, the man knew that this boy would become a difficult opponent in the future if he was allowed to gain even more experience in battle. Right now, the empire juggled too many battlefronts at once, and they didn't have a lot of leeway.

And then, the unexpected happened. Overflowing light took over the darkness in a single moment, revealing everything that had been under its veil. *A light spell*, the man thought. However, darkness immediately painted over it again. *What was that? It was light from the accessories the monsters were wearing, and it was especially bright on the orcs... But it was only for one moment.* The man didn't put too much importance into it. His ears picked up the boy's breathing once more. He could neglect the light from earlier. Something trivial like that couldn't affect anything.

Taking both of them out is too reckless.

In that case, which one? Which enemy should I prioritize here?



"Is someone there, oink?"

A snort. "That light just now let me see everyone, so I'm not as scared now, oink."

We had gathered many monsters in this orc village. Some of them depended on their hearing to sense the world around them, and there were others who didn't rely on sight at all.

Even a guy like you wouldn't be in complete control of the situation if you had to deal with me and this many monsters surrounding you. My plan was to force you into a position where you had to use Darkness to achieve your objective. So far, everything has gone accordingly.

The light spells which I had set up in advance in the orcs' belongings also activated successfully. The emerging light sources were immediately shrouded by darkness, but in your line of sight... Yeah, it was just like I thought.

"I'll admit this, orc mage. You're strong, and you are already a formidable warrior in your own right, with no need for more guidance."

In this darkness, you're singling out one person from the rest and have your sights only on them. You're able to make out the movements of the

enemy you chose to target.

I couldn't even begin to describe how fearsome his spell was. *Like I thought, you're way too strong, Rooney. Even the Royal Knights wouldn't have a chance against something like this!*

Rooney was the absolute overlord of this abnormal instance. As I listened to him, I began to take action.

"Running is futile," he continued. "I have grasped you in this *Darkness.*"

It was true, I *was* powerless. If I couldn't use magic, I couldn't do anything.

However, the same could be said for my enemy. This was an abnormal instance in time and place where nobody was allowed to attack.

Rooney's tone was steady. "No matter where you go, I can see your movements. All of them."

I ran frantically in the darkness. I had very little time left now. Bumping into monsters the whole way, I hurried desperately to my destination.

I did this all to prevent the war.

But that isn't my only goal.

Many times, I have asked her to trust me.

And so, I will trust that she really is over there.

Rooney, you probably think I'm being overtaken by fear.

In the darkness, I arrived at my intended destination.

I held someone's hand. It was small, slender, and warm.

I clutched *her* hand. I wanted to thank her for believing in me. However, I couldn't do anything. My voice wouldn't reach her in this darkness. Thus, I let go of her hand again.

The most important thing was that *she* was in the right place within this darkness.

"Surprisingly, my time here hasn't been too bad. I was able to enjoy an unexpected encounter, and I was even able to meet you at the end of my mission. In that case, I suppose I shall return to the Dustour Empire with your head as a souvenir."

My destination had been the statue that the orcs had made, the one based on a certain foolish guy they looked up to.

"I see that you're finally done moving around. Have you given up?"

I took a step forward from where I was standing, shielding the girl behind me.

From directly in front of me, a burst of bloodlust was sent in my direction.

The fear that seized her was probably devastating. And yet she chose to trust me anyway.

The darkness finally cleared away. All the limitations on this space were now removed. I could see the silhouettes of spirits.

Rooney had a tasteless, sadistic preference, and that was to see his enemy's face distorted with despair in their last moments.

She would die here. That was the only fate the anime had in store for her.

Thus, this exact moment was a crossroads where I could change the future.

There was a confident shout from ahead of me. "Your life is mine, El—"

However, I knew what was going on in Rooney's head. *You'd be wary of this situation, and with a sea of monsters gathered in one place, you'd decide to change your aim from me to Elyas. You'd kill Elyas to divert the Demon King of the North's focus to the south, and then conspire to break away from this area!*

"—ya—!"

"Too bad for you, Rooney Blough," I began.

The man right before my eyes, brandishing his knife, twisted his face in astonishment.

Even you wouldn't have ever imagined that after the darkness disperses...

"It's my win!" I yelled.

...you'd find me in front of Elyas, your assassination target, with my wand pointing at your head.



"The orc mage defeated the demon. Sure enough, it's the dawn of the age of the orcs now, oink!"

"No, woof. Slobe is actually a human. That argument doesn't make sense."

Ridiculous.

How could a man like me lose?

I have smashed countless talented mages and all my experiences from those encounters... No. That's not where the issue stems from.

With the appearance of the orc mage, monsters that had run away returned here one after another. Taking the reinforcements from White Castle into consideration, killing Elyas without fail while dealing with the orc mage would have been difficult.

Even if I could ignore the power of the orc mage, which I completely misjudged in the first place, the number of monsters here is still staggering. However, if I killed Elyas, I could cause great emotional pain to the Blue Light. And on top of that, if that Demon King turned her focus on the south, it would be of tremendous advantage to the empire. Thus, I thought that it was time to quit playing around. To eliminate Elyas without a

doubt, I changed my aim from the orc mage to her.

But now, looking back... That mage actually wanted me to use Darkness.

"The demon's looking this way. Why hasn't Slobe finished him off, oink?"

"Because they're both humans. We'll do it in his stead. We'll take revenge for everyone, oink."

"And times like this are exactly why we have an Orc King!" The orc paused. "Oh. Is Oinkus scared too, oink?"

When I used Darkness, there was a sudden manifestation of light that shouldn't have been possible. Back then, I didn't care much about it, but...was he able to confirm that my aim was Elyas with that?

And after I called off my spell, Elyas was huddling close to that weird clay statue. Wait...did she tell him where she would be in advance?

Rooney's thoughts ran wild as he tried to figure out just what had happened. *To gain the trust of monsters, that boy disguised himself as an orc, and he stayed here in this village. Not only that, but he also managed to gain Elyas's trust, and it was a bond so strong that it wouldn't break even when his identity was revealed. How did he do it? Isn't she one of those pixies that despise humans?*

The man cackled. *If that's the case, then he's crazy!*

"I'm going to look for Slobe since he's missing. Oh, look! The demon's laughing, oink."

"Yeah, we should really get Slobe to deal the last blow, oink."

That's it. No more. No matter how much I think about it, I can't figure it out.

The boy knew all about me, but I didn't know the first thing about him.

How unfair. However, as the defeated party, I should accept the consequences without complaint.

After the battle, the fake-orc boy picked up Shuya and disappeared. Elyas and a few orcs chased after the orc mage. And that left me here, tied to the earth with a Bind spell, and an abundance of monsters.

"So I was spared, just like back then...!" Rooney was both a soldier of the empire and a favorite of the Great Spirit of Darkness, Nanatrij. This man, called a "demon" in Huzak, easily slipped out of his binds and began to laugh. "Who would have thought that I'd face this much humiliation in the south?!"

All of this is so hilarious.

Who in the world did I fight? Someone with that much strength... Perhaps he's a Royal Knight of Daryth, or a direct descendant of House Denning? Surely he isn't the next Guardian Knight...or is he? No, there's also the chance that he's from Cirquista. I killed way more people hailing from Cirquista than Daryth. Considering his abilities as a mage though, there's also the possibility that he's an Archmage from Minerva!

I am dying to know the truth.

However, my first priority now is to report to her about what happened in these lands as soon as possible.

“Be proud, orc mage!” the man shouted with slight glee. “Just like you want, the war is going to *stop!*”

After all that had happened, the man sent to Huzak was convinced that, somehow, the boy knew *everything*.

Final Chapter: Dungeon City, Zenelaus

Thinking back on those unusual days living with monsters, the thing that left the biggest impression on me was probably the giant chorus of “oinks” that greeted me whenever I opened my door.

Other than that, it would probably be the sight of those orcs lined up, wanting a *Heal* from me. And then there were those busy days with no room for even one second of boredom.

I was silent, contemplating it all. *You know, now that I’ve calmed down, I’m starting to wonder whether those days were real. Was I really in Huzak, of all places?*

The moment I left that extraordinary environment, I began to have doubts that I had actually been living with *monsters*, even though I had experienced it firsthand.

This meant that telling someone else about what had happened was completely out of the question.

“So what did you want to talk about, Marco? It took *so long* for a carriage to get here in the middle of nowhere, so let’s just hurry up and go to the capital. Ah, hey! You stopped me, so Charlotte snuck in first!” I complained.

“Young Master! We should make a grand announcement to everyone that you managed to drive a Dustour spy away from Huzak!”

“You...*what?* Also, shush, you’re too loud! I’m tired, you know?!”

My life in her now monster-filled homeland had exhausted me more than I had expected. When I had returned to the country border after leaving the orc village, we had somehow managed to find an inn and collapsed into our beds. Charlotte had slept for two nights, and as for me... Believe it or not, I had apparently slept for three days and three nights!

I couldn’t believe my ears when I heard that, but that was just how tired I had been. A big part of my fatigue was probably from stress.

And when I had woken up...*this guy* had been in my room.

Instead of Charlotte, a man wearing a military uniform had been there.

Marco, the soldier who’d lost his squad to Rooney in Huzak, had been standing there in my bedroom. He had been watching me with bloodshot eyes, gripping my hands tightly in his. It reminded me of a

scene from a horror movie.

“You’re a Dragon Slayer, and then you were victorious in Huzak... With this many achievements under your belt, nobody can make light of you, Young Master! There are still people who ridicule you in the capital, but I know that you have changed! We should spread the news to everyone! Don’t you agree, Young Master?!”

“Just saying, but I *was* quite the popular guy in the capital, ya know.”

“I am not talking about *that*. I am referring to House Denning. Even though you slew a dragon, there are many in House Denning who claim that they could have done the same deed. However, facing a member of the Dustour Empire head-on is different. I am sure that they will take their hats off to you, or even more!”

“There isn’t any hard evidence that the person you encountered was a member of the empire though,” I argued. “But more importantly, are you trying to say that...”

“Yes. Young Master, I believe you should aim for the position of duke once more.”

Apparently, Princess Carina had told Marco to find me and Charlotte because we hadn’t returned even after the promised date. This guy, who had been forced to take medical leave in the capital, had immediately headed back to Huzak in high spirits. However, perhaps due to his trauma from his battle with Rooney, he had wandered aimlessly along the border between the two countries for a few days.

He had approached several inns, described the two of us, and asked them to contact him immediately if we showed up there. That was why he immediately knew that we had returned.

And when I had woken up, this guy had been right there in my room. *Jeez, that really scared me!* After that, I gave him a brief explanation of what had happened in Huzak. I had said that I found the man in question, and that we had fought the moment we met, but the man had made a quick escape.

“Marco,” I said slowly. “Even now, I am the good-for-nothing Fallen Wind.”

“Nobody would say something like that if they saw you now!”

“I don’t mind people saying that about me. All of those things are true. But can you really declare wholeheartedly that there wouldn’t be anyone who calls me the Fallen Wind?”

“Still!” Marco insisted.

“I went down the wrong path once. I don’t think soldiers would willingly trust me with their lives without reservation. Give up on nominating me, okay? Now let’s get going already. The thing I’m most

worried about right now is what would happen if we kept Her Majesty waiting even longer.”

After all, I had overstayed the promised two weeks.

According to Marco, the queen and her entourage had finished their stumping tour in several countries. They were now waiting for me with a full lineup of people with the most political influence in the country at the ready. *Well now, I wonder which one is lying in wait for me: glory or punishment? If possible, I'd prefer glory, but I did tamper with the Mystical Sword. I probably wouldn't be let off scot-free for messing with a national treasure.*

Charlotte poked her head out from the carriage, waiting for me.

“Okay, I shall move on to the next question, then,” Marco relented.

I paused, wary of what it could be. “What is it this time?”

Marco coughed once to clear his throat. “So, how far have you progressed with little Charlotte?”

I stared at him for a long time. “You... *What?*”

“You two were in the infamous Huzak alone, a pair of a man and a woman. Surely *something* must have happened. Even I gave up on you at one point and thought that you were hopeless. However, she was the *only* one who continued to support you and stay by your side the whole time, even during your dark ages. When I spent more than a fortnight with my comrades, I also started to have some...wild thoughts.”

“Hey!” I yelped. “No need to come out of the closet like that to me right now! We really have to get going! If we make the queen and everyone else wait even longer, we'll definitely be sentenced to death by hanging!”

Plus, Charlotte's a princess! I don't really feel a noble aura from her or anything right now, but a person of her caliber shouldn't have ended up as my retainer in the first place.

Charlotte and I, ending up together in that way during our trip? Your thoughts are as wicked as a demon's!

And now here we were, advancing down the path towards the capital.

I had returned to the carriage and had my fill of the jolting as we traveled. I nearly lost my fight against the drowsiness attacking me. *Oh wait, I guess it's okay to sleep. I'm no longer in Huzak.*

This was my second trip to the capital. The first journey there, from Kirsch, had been painful because Charlotte's face had been constantly twisted in torment.

However, things were different now. Even though the carriage shook, we were alone here with just the two of us. Even the silence

wasn't an uncomfortable one.

"Master Slowe, you took a while... What did you talk about with Mister Marco? Your face is awfully red."

"It's. Nothing. Nothing. At all," I said stiffly.

"Mister Marco looked really happy because he was able to see you again," Charlotte commented. "I remember him indulging me sometimes and playing with me when I was a child."

"You really think so?" I muttered with doubt. "He has always been a hot-blooded and noisy guy."

"It's cruel to say something like that! Mister Marco was by your side the whole time while you were asleep, you know?"

Uh, no. That's a little... That's very creepy. Though I admit that if it had been Charlotte in his place, I would have been in heaven.

Charlotte sighed. "I still can't believe what happened, though. Was all that time we spent in Huzak a dream? I still can't scrub those 'oinks' from my head."

There's no way we can tell others the truth. Forming good relations with monsters? What kind of fairy tale is that? "It was a dream, Charlotte. We didn't meet monsters like orcs or pixies there."

Charlotte nodded at that. "But the man you looked for ended up escaping, right? Aren't you going to tell Mister Marco that you managed to catch him once?"

"I won't. More like, I can't. I have the feeling that he might interrogate me about everything if I did."

As Charlotte had said, Rooney had managed to run away.

The orcs had been alight with righteous indignation, saying that they must take revenge for all the comrades he had killed, but nobody dared approach him because of their fear. All they could manage to do to attack him was to splash water on the man from afar and throw rocks. However, even after Rooney was captured, he only looked at me. He had been watching me very closely.

After that, Charlotte had returned to the orc village with monsters from White Castle, and the man had taken advantage of the chaos and made his escape. Eagle Eye had tracked him from the skies and reported that the man was heading north. A few days later, the man had disappeared from Huzak safely and without incident.

Wait, "safely" sounds weird. But it's not like he barely scraped out of there by the skin of his teeth either, so...

"We encountered him by chance and ended up fighting, but monsters showed up, interrupting our altercation. That guy disappeared off to who-knows-where, and we also ran out of Huzak, barely escaping alive... I suppose that will be the story we'll go along with."

Charlotte hummed, frowning. "But it feels a little wasteful."

I couldn't tell Charlotte this, but I'd never had plans of capturing the guy in the first place. As long as that guy had his fingers burned in Huzak, it would be enough to spontaneously erase the catalyst for the beginning of the war.

Ugh, I really don't want to get involved with him ever again! Even though he's that strong, he can't even hold a candle to the Three Musketeers... That's so depressing.

As for our identity reveal as humans, well... Apparently, that black dragon had gone pretty wild in Huzak when it'd just woken up. All of the monsters ended up thanking me for defeating it, praising me, and saying that I was truly amazing.

Charlotte stared at me suspiciously. "Why are you grinning like that?"

"Nothing! I'm not grinning or anything like that."

"You are too! Look, you're even still doing it! I'll take this opportunity to say something that has been on my mind. Master Slowe, you were way too lovestruck over Miss Elyas. Sure, she's cute, but the way you acted was a big fat no!"

"Huh...? Uh, I don't... Well, I don't think that was the case at all! It might be a misunderstanding on your part."

Charlotte didn't seem convinced. "You were extremely head over heels over her... There's no way I'm misunderstanding!"

After Rooney's escape, with our objective accomplished, we had left the orc village under the cloak of night.

However, Elyas had hugged and kissed me during our parting, saying thank you. I had been in paradise. Even now, the memory made a grin creep onto my lips.

"I probably seemed kind to Elyas because, well... You know what I mean. It was the first time I saw a real pixie!"

"A *real* pixie?!" Charlotte hissed. "Are you trying to accuse me of being fake?!"

Wait, what?! Why would you be upset over that?! I mean, of course I'd be kind to her! She's a real pixie, you know?!

"I-I'm just joking around!" I said hastily. "So Charlotte, what are your thoughts about your homeland visit?"

Well, I call it a homeland visit, but we were kind of in the orc village most of the time...

We had only managed to catch a glimpse of White Castle. However, it seemed Charlotte was satisfied with just that.

On the topic of Elyas, though... I really couldn't ever thank her enough. She had been willing to accept me even though I was a human, as well as my claim that the demon would prioritize her as his

target. In that darkness, she chose to be in the place we had agreed upon.

It had probably been a terrifying experience for her. And yet she had still chosen to have faith in me. That was why I had been able to break Rooney's spirit without killing him. Plus, the fact that I was able to talk to Charlotte normally again was thanks to her too.

We had parted with the promise of meeting each other again. However, we were humans, and she was a pixie. That was a future that might never bear fruit.

"Miss Elyas and the others mentioned that they might return to the north relatively soon, right?" Charlotte muttered.

"I guess that makes sense, considering what happened."

The monsters had ultimately decided that they would go back to the north. Apparently, they would start to gradually migrate monsters there. Oinkus had been against the idea, but that guy's opinion never really went far in the decision-making process.

After we went through our topics of interest and fell into a comfortable silence...

"Charlotte... Once again, I'm sorry. I deceived you for a long time."

Once we arrived in the capital, we probably wouldn't be able to have time where it was just the two of us, like last time.

That wasn't the whole reason for it, but...I felt that I needed to apologize to her again.

"I also kept my secret for a long time," Charlotte replied, slowly. "You're not the only one at fault, Master Slowe."

I had been guilty about keeping my silence on her secret. I had kept it under wraps for a long time so that it would never, ever come out into the open.

"Can you keep what I'm about to say between the two of us?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah."

"After going back to my homeland... In the end, I wasn't able to see anyone I knew again. Honestly, I was actually a little sad, thinking that I no longer had anywhere I could call home."

I hesitated. "Charlotte..."

"After coming back to Daryth, though, I started thinking about what I wanted to do after this, and it made me really excited. It's a long holiday, after all! We've already gone through half of it, but I think we could still go out and have fun somewhere. And that's when I realized that the place I could return to, the place I belong to, that's *here*. Before I knew it, this country had filled that position in my heart.

And that's why I think I'm a very lucky girl."

You know, I used to think there was a fair chance that I could have lived like that blackhearted Piggy Duke in the anime. If I had chosen to have second thoughts and to carry my secret to the grave...

Charlotte continued. "And about that... I'm only here today all thanks to you, Master Slowe, so..."

I'd loathe for that to happen, but I know myself best.

After all, I'm the kind of guy who's a big coward, at the end of the day.

"Thank you so much for saving me on that day!" Charlotte said happily.

Unexpectedly... *No, it isn't unexpected.* Tears nearly welled up in my eyes. *It's a critical hit!* If Marco hadn't been trying to spy on us from outside the carriage, it would have been a close call. *That bastard...*

But hey, isn't that great, blackhearted Piggy Duke? Your hard work paid off.

"So, please continue to take care of me from now on too!"

Charlotte bowed.

Unlike Charlotte, who bowed her head briskly, I lowered my head nervously. "Y-Yeah..." I stammered. "Same here."

"But please keep an eye out for what I'll do from now on, okay, Master Slowe?"

"Huh? For what?"

"In the near future, my talent as a mage will explode! Probably."

I was stunned. "E-Explode?"

"Yes! After all, I'm a princess. I think I've become stronger with this return trip to my homeland."

According to Charlotte, she had leveled up as a mage now that she had managed to visit Huzak again. She had been forced to face the fact that there was nobody left there, but she was still able to overcome her sorrow. Charlotte spoke passionately, saying that she had become formidable since she was able to look forward, instead of being stuck in the past.

Who was the guy who thought Charlotte was always clumsy and not noble at all? She's so damned cool!

"I pray that my talent will explode..." Charlotte cut off with a gasp. "Wait! Master Slowe, our promise! Do you remember it?!"

"What are you talking about this time?" I asked.

"My wand! You said you'd buy one for me!"

"Huh? Ah, uh, that... Hm? Wait, really?"

"What's with that half-hearted reply?! You definitely said that! You promised you'd buy one! Please buy me a top-class wand that is suitable for my talent!"

According to Charlotte, her current goal was to treasure the connections she had right now. She wanted to become an outstanding mage, gain the recognition of House Denning, and for them to deem her a proper mage.

Perhaps, one day, we might be separated. However, as long as Charlotte was aiming to become a mage in her own right, we could be together.

Our relationship would probably change from our past relationship as lord and retainer to something new.

Some part of me was relieved. I had thought, slightly dreadfully, that Charlotte would become a whole new person after her visit to Huzak.

“Hey, Master Slowe. May I say something weird?”

“Weird? What, like how a top-class wand befits you or something?” I looked at her face and made a hasty retreat. “I-I was kidding! So please don’t look so scary!”

Charlotte simmered down after a while. “Back to what I was talking about. I think I saw Lady Alicia in the forest back there.”

“N-No way. I bet you were seeing things...”

Now, with this, I had changed the future. *Since the war isn’t going to happen, I suppose I could stand by and watch what Shuya and Alicia will do from now on. I’m curious whether or not they’ll become a couple even if the anime plotline doesn’t unfold.*

Other than that, I can teach Tina, overflowing with talent, and I can live out my life in the more lavish, reconstructed Kirsch. I don’t plan on sticking my head into the bloody battle between my siblings aiming for the position of the duke, so I’ll just live peacefully as a student at Kirsch.

The vast castle walls around the capital seemed to stretch far into the horizon as they entered my vision.

Nobody knew this, but I had managed to change the future. *I’ll waltz back into Daryth with my chin held high. I also need to return the ring to her too.*

“Out of the way!” a voice shouted. “Something insane has happened in Zenelaus!”

Zenelaus... That reminds me. Shuya and Alicia are probably in the Dungeon City right now. It was a city of adventurers. In the anime, it had been the first city destroyed by the war.

One of the Three Musketeers had been waiting there for the signal for the beginning of the war, and they had probably returned to the north after the Great Spirit of Darkness contacted them to tell them otherwise. That guy was a reasonable man, after all. On top of that,

the man in question didn't particularly want to invade the south, despite being a member of the empire.

If the war did indeed happen, I would have to face those three. I had wanted to avoid that at all costs.

"The guild master of Zenelaus has sealed off the dungeons!"

So please. Someone, tell me that this isn't actually happening right now.



The Dungeon City, Zenelaus, was in pure chaos.

The biggest Adventurers' Guild in the south was located there, and it managed all twenty-four dungeons in the area. Those dungeons were great gaping holes in the desolate wilderness that carved gently descending paths down into the darkness of the underground.

"Sealing off the dungeons?! What in the world is going on?!"

"Quit your whining! The will of the guild master is absolute! Come on, out of the way!"

"Do you see how many adventurers have gathered here?! And you're still not going to give us an explanation! Don't screw with us!"

A certain boy was among the crowd. He was a youth from Daryth, who had somehow managed to stumble his way into Zenelaus. His friend stood next to him.

The girl, Alicia, would say that the fact they were able to successfully take a shortcut across Huzak had been a miracle.

Still, what was that all about? Alicia had been waiting at the outskirts of the forest when orcs, carrying an unconscious Shuya on their backs, had shown up. The orcs claimed that they were working under the orders of the orc mage and disappeared into the forest once again after they left Shuya there. To be frank, Alicia had no clue what was going on, but there were odd monsters here and there that saved adventurers who got lost in a dungeon.

She decided that had to be it. There hadn't been any other possibilities she could come up with. *But what the heck is going on now?*

"Come out! The guild's staff needs to explain themselves!"

"We were going to enter one just now!" a man yelled. "Look! We bought this much gear; how much money do you think we spent?!"

When Shuya had finally come to, he couldn't remember what had happened after he had tried to chase that criminal all by himself. He'd been utterly perplexed, but Alicia had brushed the topic aside, saying that he had been lucky just to be alive. After that, they had finally entered the Freedom Union. From there, they had struggled but

somehow managed to arrive in Zenelaus, and they'd spent several days recuperating there.

When Shuya had declared that he was ready to be up and about again, he had dragged Alicia all the way to the Adventurers' Guild. There, Alicia's identity as Cirquistan royalty had been exposed, causing quite a stir. A man who seemed like he was fairly high up the ladder had tried to persuade Alicia against registering as an adventurer because he had thought it was ridiculous.

And in the middle of that argument, a large crowd of adventurers suddenly crashed into the guild like an avalanche. Wanting to figure out what was going on, Alicia and Shuya looked for an opportunity to go outside, and they took it when they saw an opening.

There was an abrupt, deafening silence. All of the men who had been raging for an explanation were now as quiet as statues.

The largest Adventurers' Guild in the south was known as Nemesis. A silhouette appeared on the balcony of the building's top floor. Everyone's eyes were glued to the figure, and Alicia's eyes also found themselves drawn to that spot.

Even someone like her who wasn't too well-informed about the affairs of adventurers could tell who it was. Shuya had professed at one point that he was a fan of this young adventurer. The youth standing on the balcony had a gentle atmosphere to him, and he kissed the ring on his left index finger while everyone's eyes were still on him.

The next second, a colossal battle-ax appeared, which seemed out of place compared to the youth's demeanor.

It was a mystical item from the Adventurers' Guild, which was only given to S-class adventurers. A sublime weapon that changed its appearance depending on the characteristics of its wielder. And its wielder, this youth, was the man who held absolute authority in Zenelaus. Everyone held him with reverence as they waited for him to speak.

"Everyone, please listen to me." His voice had a mysterious quality to it, which was able to soothe everyone in hearing range.

However, one of the most notable things about the kind-looking youth was the irregular eye patch that covered half of his face.

Beneath it, he possessed a cursed eye. The youth had a tragic past, and when his eye had first awoken, he had reduced an entire village to ashes with flames. Even Alicia knew of the legends of this young, charismatic reformer of the Adventurers' Guild.

"Right now, the Dungeon City is facing unprecedented danger."

If the "Three Musketeers" was the title given to those born in

Dustour with strength that transcended normal human limits, then those who tackled the monster-spawning dungeons could be considered “Servants of Humanity.”

This young man was the supreme wielder of power in Zenelaus, one of the central pillars of the Freedom Union. He was the Eye of the Crimson Lotus, one of the S-class adventurers scattered across the continent, and he opened his mouth to begin his speech.

Hearing the words of the guild master, the audience turned pale. Some even ran away, trembling with fear. Shuya and Alicia themselves were petrified. However, the words spilling forth from the young hero of the Adventurers’ Guild incited a fire within the listeners, one after another. The youth had the natural disposition of a charismatic leader.

However, there was one single person in Zenelaus who knew the truth. He knew that the fall of Zenelaus had already been set in stone and that they could only choose the manner in which they crashed to the ground.

The Eye of the Crimson Lotus knew exactly what his own words meant, and what they would lead to. His name would probably go down in history as one of the most horrid guild masters.

Even still, he bade the few thousands of adventurers in Zenelaus to certain death. For the sake of the future.

“Marco, I have a request for you.”

The stage had been set in the Dungeon City, Zenelaus, the pride of the Freedom Union.

It was a city of warriors, surrounded by a desolate wilderness and numerous dungeons under human management. That city of adventurers, which had lifted the country of merchants up into becoming one of the four countries in the Great Southern Alliance, was about to tumble into the bottom of the abyss.

At the end of the first story arc of the *Shuya Marionette* anime, in episode twelve entitled “The Defeated Dungeon City,” these adventurers lost to a single man. One of the defeated adventurers was even the anime protagonist. Many wielded their full strength against their adversary. These included the Archflare, a skilled adventurer who would later become Shuya’s master. The kind hero, Eye of the Crimson Lotus, whom Shuya had deemed as his role model was another. Many more adventurers joined the fray, and even Eldred participated, using Shuya’s body to channel their might.

However, all of this was still not enough to best that lone man: he was one of the Three Musketeers, the pride of the Dustour Empire.

“Go find Silva and force him to *wake up*. I know he’s somewhere in the castle, slacking off.”

The undefeated man who would take on the Dungeon City was one of the Three Musketeers, one of the most popular characters in the anime. He was even so popular that he was on equal standing in the rankings with Slowe Denning, whose popularity was due to his eternal sorrow.

“Tell him it’s an emergency and he needs to come to Zenelaus as soon as possible.”

All the power gathered in Zenelaus wouldn’t be enough to best Dreibach Steibelt, the half-human, half-fiend apparition.

Afterword

Winter has arrived. It's so cold that it almost seems surreal, considering how I wrote about the arrival of summer in the afterword of the last volume!

Now then, has my life changed in any way since then?

...Not really, no.

If I had to pick one thing, it might be how I've gotten a little busier with work.

Lately, I've been spending a lot of time trying to find joy on weekdays as I lead my everyday life. For example, I found one way is watching TV.

To me, a TV is just a machine for watching movies on the weekend...or at least that was what I used to think. However, I've gradually found more programs that I'm interested in, so I've been watching it on weekdays too.

I've recently found an especially interesting show. It's a program on *TV Asah** with Takahide Tomoyori, called *The Great Adventures of NasuD*. The director has been going into the Amazon rainforest and excitedly reviewing his adventures. So far, he's eaten monkeys and crocodiles and has tried all sorts of crazy things.

I watch it and think, "You must be kidding me!" I never know what's going to happen next, and none of it feels like it's following a forced set pattern or convention.

It's *super* entertaining!

The future is a complete mystery, so I'm always looking forward to the days when it airs.

Speaking of following forced set patterns and not knowing what will happen in the future, this volume of *Piggy Duke* probably went along those lines too.

If everything went according to the Piggy Duke's plans in Huzak, the future would have been rewritten according to his wishes. He would have prevented all of the events that built up to the war.

In this future, he wouldn't have to worry his head off about the anime's plot. With only days of happiness waiting for him, he could mingle with his past comrades, enjoy the brilliance of youth in Kirsch, and also choose to aim for a glorious future.

Or, well, that had been his plan.

However, due to his actions, the future will change in ways he

never expected!

Unlike the previous volumes that are more self-contained, this volume is one that bridges the gap to the next book.

I really struggled with this volume and my deadlines were extended, among other things... I really can't express my gratitude enough to everyone involved. Thank you so much!

The next volume will be focused on resolve and responsibility and will sign off on this arc.

Oh, before I forget, I would like to announce something. Believe it or not, this series is getting a manga adaptation!

Apparently, the serialization is going to start this winter, and it will be published on websites like Monthly Comic Alive and ComicWalker. The artist in charge of the manga is fuji-sama.

I was able to take a look at the illustrations and materials in advance. The art style is done in a comical way that's perfect for the Piggy Duke. I'm so excited!!!

As the person responsible for the original work, I shall also try my best. Please look forward to more *Piggy Duke* in the future.

See you again!

Rhythm Aida
(Published December 20, 2017)



4

Slowe Denning

The protagonist who reincarnated into the world of his favorite anime. The third son of House Denning, and a problem student of Kirsch Mage Institute. At least, he used to be...?

Charlotte Lily Huzak

The princess of the once-great kingdom of Huzak, now destroyed. Currently Slowe's retainer, a far cry from her former royal position.

Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke

*This Time I'm Gonna ♡
Tell Her How I Feel!*



"Haaah, haaah...
Ugh, quit complaining and focus on running, Alicia!"

"This is the worst! The worst, I say! I really shouldn't have followed you here!"

Alicia Bulla Dia Cirquista

The second princess of Cirquista, the Metropolis of Water.
Slowe's former fiancée.

Shuya Newkern

A hot-blooded fortune-teller and a fire mage. Slowe considers Shuya his rival.

"For starters, let me give you a brief rundown on the current situation in Huzak."

"Why am I wearing that kind of outfit underneath this cloak...?"

Slobe

Slowe's monster disguise.
He infiltrates Huzak to prevent the coming war as depicted in the anime.

Elyas

Sister of the Blue Light, who is the Demon King of the North. She wishes for the peaceful coexistence of humans and monsters.

"You're the one who can use magic despite being an orc, aren't you?"

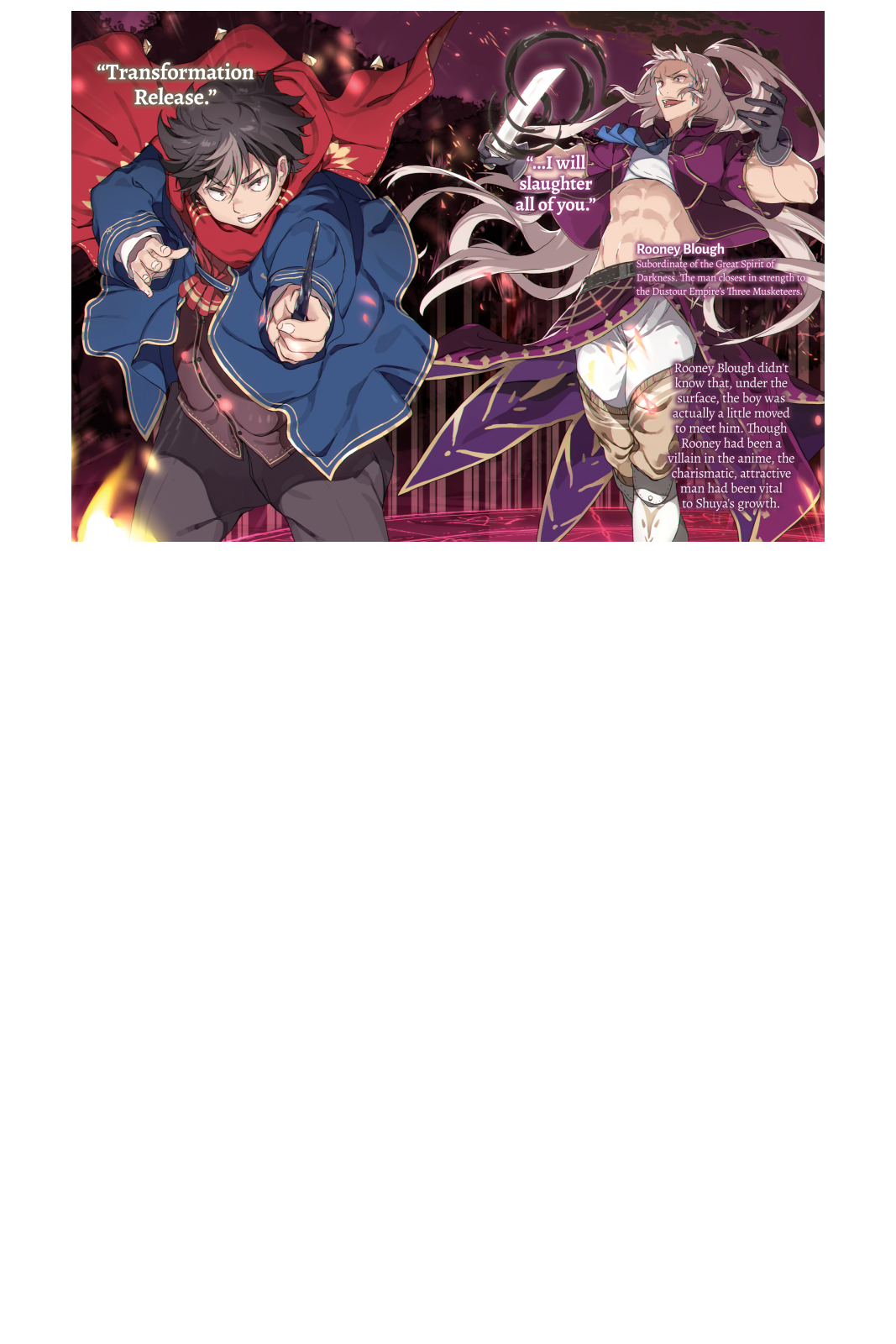
"Slobe, my orc village welcomes you, oink!"

Oinkus

The Ore King of the village. He opposes the 'demon' that has appeared in Huzak.

It looked like they'd restored an abandoned village and expanded it by cutting down trees. Orcs ran around the place, snorting and chatting noisily.





"Transformation
Release."

"...I will
slaughter
all of you."

Rooney Blough

Subordinate of the Great Spirit of
Darkness. The man closest in strength to
the Dustour Empire's Three Musketeers.

Rooney Blough didn't
know that, under the
surface, the boy was
actually a little moved
to meet him. Though
Rooney had been a
villain in the anime, the
charismatic, attractive
man had been vital
to Shuya's growth.

Translator's Notes

Welcome back to this latest edition of Weird Trivia. I'm Zihan, the translator for *Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke*! I'd like to share some background about some of the more obscure terms we had to localize this time, so let's jump right into it!

Prologue: Rebuilding Kirsch Mage Institute

Once on shore, we pray no more

Alicia comments on how quickly the students of Kirsch regained their carefree attitudes despite being in great danger just a short while ago. The original phrase used here is *nodomoto sugireba atsusa wo wasureru* ("once it's past one's throat, they forget how hot it was"). It describes the fickle nature of humans and how easily one can forget events very quickly after they happen, even if they were significant to them at the time. This phrase can also refer to gratitude to someone or one's debt to someone, and not just suffering or danger in the case above.

This proverb is also used in the Edo variant of *iroha karuta*, a card-matching game for children. In *iroha karuta*, each *yomifuda* (the cards that are read aloud) has a proverb starting with a different syllable of the Japanese *hiragana* alphabet. Each *yomifuda* corresponds with a *torifuda* card that illustrates this proverb with the starting syllable written in the corner of the card. In a game of *iroha karuta*, the *torifuda* cards are spread out for all the players to see. When the *yomifuda* is read, whoever taps the correct *torifuda* gets to keep that card. This process repeats until all the cards are gone, and whoever has the most *torifuda* wins.

As for the *iroha* part of *iroha karuta*, *iroha* is one arrangement of the *kana* alphabet, compared to English's A, B, C, D, and so on. The current most widely-used system is the *gojyuuon* ("fifty sounds"), and the modern version of this system was defined around the end of the Edo period (1603-1868). In education and textbooks, *gojyuuon* began to be implemented at the start of the Meiji period (1868-1912). The *iroha* order is based on the famous Japanese poem of the same name, and before the Meiji period, Japanese children used to write in the

iroha order when practicing *hiragana*.

The *iroha* system still persisted well into the Showa period (1926-1989) and it still sees usage today. In Japan's Road Traffic Act, for example, some lists start with *i*, *ro*, *ha*, like how English uses A, B, C. In an article from 2016, the Japan Pension Service apparently still used the *iroha* system to arrange their files in the office!

Chapter 1: The Forgotten Events of the Anime

Like a fleeing hare

After Slowe's (rather tactless) shout at the party, Charlotte ran away from the hall at lightning speed. The phrase used here is *datto no gotoku* ("like a fleeing hare"), reminding the reader of a rabbit running away at top speed. The phrase is derived from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, an ancient military Chinese treatise dating back to roughly the fifth century BCE. The original quote is, "At first, then, exhibit the coyness of a maiden, until the enemy gives you an opening; afterwards emulate the rapidity of a running hare, and it will be too late for the enemy to oppose you" (Sun Tzu).

Kuuru

When Slowe refers to the first twelve or so episodes of *Shuya Marionette*, he calls it a *kuuru*. *Kuuru*, also commonly written as "cour" in English-language anime spaces, is an industrial term in the Japanese broadcast industry that refers to three months or a quarter of the year. What makes this a little complicated is that one *kuuru* does not equate to one season of an anime, also known as one *ki*.

A *ki* ("season") refers to all the episodes spanning from the start of a continuous broadcast period through to the last episode. It can be twelve, twenty-four, a hundred, and so on! *Kuuru*, meanwhile, refers to a specific time period. Most anime airs weekly, which translates to around twelve or so episodes in a three month period, or one *kuuru*.

Undei no sa ("like night and day")

Slowe compares the immaculately dressed Royal Knights to the tattered Marco, saying that the difference between the two was like night and day. The original phrase used here is *undei no sa* ("the difference between cloud and mud"). Here, the clouds allude to the sky and the mud alludes to the ground, and the phrase refers to the great distance between them.

The phrase is believed to have been derived from the poem *Shang You* by Bai Juyi, a famous Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty. The latter half of the poem laments the loss of an old friend whom the speaker used to share a great comradeship with back when they were both poor. The friend then went on to work in the imperial court. However, when they met on a road in Chang'an, the old friend didn't even turn back to the speaker, as if they were strangers. The speaker

feels as if there is now a large rift between them, like the divide between the clouds in the heavens and the mud on the earth.

Se ni hara wa kaerarenai (“one can’t substitute their stomach with their back”)

Slowe decided that he would strike a deal with No Face and pay a small price for what he needed to do. The original phrase used here roughly translates to “one can’t substitute their stomach with their back.” The “stomach” here refers to all of the vital organs of the body, not necessarily just the stomach. Even for the sake of protecting one’s back, it wouldn’t do one much good to harm their organs instead. Thus, to protect something precious, small sacrifices have to be made.

There is a second interpretation of this phrase. The stomach may actually refer to oneself, and the back may refer to other people. In this case, the phrase means that when someone is in a desperate situation, they don’t have the leisure of caring about things or people other than the issue at hand.

This phrase is also used in the Edo variant of the *iroha karuta*!

Doku wo kurawaba sara made (“might as well lick the plate if one already ingested poison”)

Before attacking the hydra, Slowe says that he was “in for a penny, in for a pound,” implying that he was willing to put in the effort needed to get rid of the monster. The phrase used here roughly translates to “might as well lick the plate if one already ingested poison.” If someone ate poisoned food and they were going to die either way, licking the poisoned plate wouldn’t make much of a difference, would it?

This phrase is commonly used in two ways. The first way often refers to someone who has done an evil deed and decides to further devote themselves to that evil road since they were going to be punished either way. The second refers to someone who has already completed something halfway, and since they’ve already come so far, they might as well see it through to the end.

Chapter 2: Huzak

Sukedachi

Slowe offers his assistance to the orcs during their first meeting, and the word used here is *sukedachi*, which can mean help, aid, backup, or an assistant in a fight. This word literally translates to “a helping sword.” The *dachi* part of the word refers to *tachi*, a type of traditional Japanese sword worn by samurai in feudal Japan.

The *sukedachi* originated from feudal Japan and has existed since around the Muromachi period (1336-1573). There was the concept of *adauchi* vendetta, where one took revenge for their family or lords in a battle of swords. For legal *adauchi*, one had to get a permit from the magistrate offices, and their details were recorded in the *Kougi Gochou*. (There were a lot of strict rules for the whole process!) However, some avengers were women and children, and it was difficult for them to carry out their revenge. In these cases, they were allowed to enlist the help of others. These helpers were referred to as *sukedachi*. Like the avengers themselves, these *sukedachi* had to ask for permission from the magistrate offices first before helping. A random stranger couldn't just show up and help.

By the time the Meiji period came around (1868-1912), the term simply meant “to help” or “to aid” since the samurai were no more.

Afterword

NasuD

The Great Adventures of NasuD as mentioned in the afterword is a TV program featuring the TV director Takahide Tomoyori, nicknamed NasuD. (In Japan, directors' and producers' names are commonly suffixed with D or P.) The series has an official YouTube channel and some episodes are available on there, including his adventures in the Amazon rainforest area. Some even have English subtitles! Search for “CrazyD's survival” and you should find it.

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Reincarnated as the Piggy Duke: This Time I'm Gonna Tell Her
How I Feel! Volume 4
by Rhythm Aida

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